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LUCKY JAKE AND OTHER STORIES

By

Everett Dean Phelps

B. A. University of Montana, 1956

Presented in partial fulfillment of the of the requirements for the degree of

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## LUCKY JAKE

A lot of people have asked me about Jake Randall, now that the newspapers have written up his death. He would have enjoyed that. One of those human interest stories. Reading the newspapers got me to thinking about the times I knew Jake. One article said he left an estate of over \$100,000, and died without leaving a will. That would be just like him. The same story called him a "colorful character." There are a lot of ways of looking at things.

That article was all wrong though. Jake Randall might have left \$100,000 but he never made it playing the horses. That sounds good, but it just isn't so. Although for a long time I thought he was doing well enough on the horses to leave that kind of money. He acted like it.

I don't think he ever did any real work. Anything you would have to do with your hands, I mean. He referred to himself as "more than a passing-fair judge of the relative merits of various equines. The horse, gentlemen." He would say this taking his cigar out of his mouth and leaning forward to take you into his confidence.

I was pretty young when I met Jake. Those were quite some times. Lots of booze, gambling, and girls. I still make it to the two-dollar windows. Before I ever met Jake there was talk around the track about him. He didn't boast about any system he had for playing the horses, nor did he come around after a race and claim that he had the winner. He just smiled and looked like he had the winner.

I could have used some tips then and now. Money never stayed with me very long. I never made it as a jockey because I got too

heavy, and I never saved enough to buy any horses of my own. So I'm still rubbing them down the same way I was when I met Jake.

He had on a gold-colored vest and a black suit. It was a pretty warm day, too. Funny how I can remember after all these years. He stood out. In those clothes he was just completely apart from the rest of the people in line. There he was, standing just a step out of line with the rest, his hat tilted over his eyes, smoking a cigar and leaning on a cane.

I was a few places in front of him and I had to keep turning to watch him. I'd never had any clothes like he was wearing, and the people I knew then couldn't afford them either.

He would let the line move ahead of him, and there would be a space between him and the person in front of him. People behind him began to complain. You know. Horse players are the most impatient bunch on earth. Always afraid that the bell will ring before they get a chance to get their money down. And lose it likely, most of them.

Well, I was curious about him. A warm day, and there he was in a black suit. When the complaints got louder and people began to shove, he stepped out of the line and looked back along it. He wasn't a big man either. The shoving stopped and he walked on slowly and took his place in the line.

I got my ticket and hung around. I figured a guy like him might really chuck it; you know, ten or twenty dollars. That would have been big money then. But he didn't. He bet two dollars, just like the rest. Only he laid it down like it was two one-hundred dollar bills. Then he took the ticket and stuck it in his hatband. That struck me as pretty

dumb. I hung on to those tickets then and still do.

But he put it in his hatband and walked toward the finish line. He walked like there was no reason to hurry. About every third step he'd stick his cane in the ground. It was a fancy hardwood one with a big green knob on top.

I stayed pretty close to him all the way to the finish, and leaned on the rail beside him until they came and made us get back. I finally spoke to him and he answered right up. Not gabby you understand, a little reserved. But we talked about the race and I told him which horse I had bet on. He just smiled. About that time they sprung the gate on them and we had to turn to watch them go around the track. There was a lot of yelling and shoving at the finish, but I stayed right in there. I saw the winner, and the number he carried wasn't the one I had on my ticket.

Jake was standing back from the rail, leaning on his cane. I walked over to him.

"Well?" I said.

He smiled and took off his hat. It was a homburg. He took the ticket out of the band and showed it to me. It was on the winning horse. He was still smiling when they hung up the winning numbers. His horse paid over twenty dollars.

"Clever of him, wasn't it?" he said.

"What?" I said.

"That animal," he said, "The one that had the number corresponding to the number I have on this pink piece of paper."

"You mean it's luck?" I said.

"A measure of it. Certainly, a measure of it."

"I suppose you have a system?"

"No, no. It's simply that I often like to bet on horses that win."

That was almost twenty years ago. There was a lot more that happened after that and even now I'm not sure how to look at it. At the end I was mad all right, but there was more to it than that. I was a little sick too.

There were a lot of questions asked about Jake. Not to his face, I mean. Some of them were asked of me. Where did he come from? Was he a big player from the eastern tracks? Was he really winning money? I really didn't care and besides, he looked like he was winning money. I kept hoping he would let me in on some of the winners. I didn't make so much money that I wouldn't have liked to increase it. Easy money when you're young always sounds the best.

The way he looked kept saying "money" to the horseplayers, and it irritated them. Even though they never really knew if he cashed any tickets, the appearance was enough. He was traveling first cabin and so he had to be winning. Then there was a way he had of consoling a loser that seemed funny to me. He would say something about their "inability to judge the relative merits of certain racehorses." It was always delivered leaning forward on his cane with his cigar in his free hand. Then he would straighten up, flick the ash from his cigar, and look away in another direction. There were plenty of people hoping he would get his come-uppance.

I don't know who tagged him "Lucky Jake." The name was probably given to him by some player who didn't like the way Jake analyzed the



inability of losers to pick winners. That wasn't the only name he had, though. They called his Vesty, Jake-The-Cano, and Jackie Dandy. There were others worse than that. Jiggs McClure called him "a damned sweet-smelling poppy."

Jiggs has been dead now for quite a while. A fine trainer, loved horses. He was hard on jockeys, other trainers, handlers, and himself. Never on horses, though. He tied up his whole life in horses. Horses and one other thing. It was always amazing how he could put it away and still get around.

I was working for Jiggs then and he told me to keep Jake away from the barn. "He not only makes me nervous but my horses too. Say, how would you like to see your fancy friend come waltzing around here and step in something?"

He would laugh over that often, but aside from some hard looks, he stayed away from Jake. I think he only spoke to him once, and that was to tell him to stay the hell away from his barn. He meant it and Jake knew he meant it. He never came around to our barn after that.

Jake never pressed himself on anyone. He was the subject of a lot of conversation, most of it bad. If any of it bothered him he didn't show it. "It shows that I'm in the public eye," he'd say.

Well, we'd go from track to track then just like we do now. Little tracks and big ones, from Canada to Arizona. Sometimes when we traveled I might even be on the same train with Jake, I was young and I could just never get over how he looked and the way he acted. There was always a poker game going on somewhere and a bottle if you wanted a drink. Jake never took part in any of it. He didn't drink and he didn't gamble on anything except the horses. "I'm an open,

simple man," he would say, giving you that smile. "My vices are simple too. I smoke an occasional cigar and I enjoy reasonable success at judging the conditioning and the past performances of various horses."

As a matter of fact, we were sitting on a train when he first compared women to horses. He'd been telling me about how simple his vices were and I asked him about women.

"Ah," he said, "Only for the young. Sheer folly." Then he told me that there was more money to be made on horses.

"I don't want to make money on them," I said, "That wasn't my idea at all."

"Oh, well yes," he said, "There's that. I was speaking of involvement."

I asked him about that but he said he thought he would take a nap. He said something about sleep being more conducive to the digestion than conversation.

We were running in the south at the time, and after the train ride I didn't see Jake again for quite a while. The next was about half over and I was wondering what had happened to him. When I did see him he had the woman with him.

She didn't look like a woman. She couldn't have been over twenty or maybe not that much. A lot younger than Jake, anyway. She was thin and kind of pasty looking as if she never had enough sun. She never had much to say to anyone.

Jake introduced her as his wife. Willin he said her name was. It was hard to believe, especially since I figured I knew him pretty well and he had never said anything about a wife. I shouldn't have been surprised; he never said much about anything else either.

I got him alone and figured on having some fun with him about it.

"You've been holding out," I said.

"Oh, not really. It simply didn't seem necessary to mention it."

That was as far as the conversation got. I'd see them together around the track every day. She would just nod her head if you spoke to her, but mostly she stood to one side while anyone was talking to Jake. She never took her eyes off him. She just seemed to be always waiting, and she didn't smile at all.

After she came Jake and I didn't see as much of each other. Most of the time when I did see him it would be in the evenings and he would be alone. If I asked after the girl he would smile and say "passing fair" or something like that. It was Jiggs who told me they weren't married. When I asked him how he knew he said he wasn't as blind as me. We walked on down to the barn and he sat me down on a bale of hay and talked to me. I can remember just as if it were yesterday.

"I'm not as blind as you," Jiggs said. "He's using her."

"You don't like him," I said.

"Can't you see anything?"

"So he dresses flashy," I said, "I wouldn't mind having some of those clothes myself."

"It isn't the clothes. It's the smell."

"Tonic," I said.

"Does he owe you any money?"

"No." Jake owed me \$50. He had never really asked for it. I kind of pressed it on him.

I couldn't see where all this was loading. Something was mugging at me but I wasn't sure what it was.

"She's a hooker," Jiggs said.

"What?" I said.

"In the evenings down by the barns or in town in the bars. It don't make no difference. It might be her but it don't be him."

"How long have you known this?"

"Knew it right away. Well, I couldn't prove it. If I could have I would have run him off."

"Turned him in?" I said.

"No. Run him off. He's careful. He don't do the hustling.

She does. She collects the money and takes it to him."

"How did you find all this out?"

"She came to the wrong guy, someone who knew him."

"Who?" I said.

"No."

"What?"

"Yes. No. I didn't hang around him so she didn't know. The day after she came to me I saw her and she looked tough. I'm sure he saw her talking to me. I've talked to others too. You seen him today?"

"Yes. Not more than a half an hour ago." I got up.

"Where you going? Lasten, he ain't the first one you'll ever see."

"That ain't it," I said.

"That is it then? Maybe she left."

"Not the way she followed him around."

"Well she probably ain't the only one."

"It isn't the girl," I said.

"You want to bust him?"

"I don't know if I want to do that or not," I said, "I just want to see him."

I went to the main gate and waited. I figured Jake would take the main exit. About half an hour after the last race, when the crowd had thinned out, he came. The girl was walking just to his right and a couple of steps back. He was wearing the black suit and the gold vest.

"Are you leaving?" I said.

"On to greener pastures," he said.

"I don't know why," I said, "But I lied about you just now."

"Ah?"

"Somebody asked me if you owed me money and I said you didn't."

He didn't bat an eye. He tapped the cane on the ground and flicked the ashes from his cigar. He kept his eyes on my face.

"You weren't figuring on leaving without paying me, were you?"

"Let's not play games," he said, "I'll send you the money."

"When your luck on the horses is better." I looked at the girl but she kept her eyes on Jake. She was just waiting for him to leave so she could follow. Jake had a smile on his face.

He straightened up and adjusted his tie and hat. He lifted the cane and held it lightly in the crook of his arm.

"There's another way," I said, "I could just get my money's worth out of your hide right now."

"Perhaps," he said. He let the cane slide down into his right hand.

"It makes no sense," I said. The girl stayed there but she wasn't looking at Jake now. She was watching people going through the gates. I felt silly standing there.

"Go on," I said.

"I will send you the money," he said.

"Money that you win on the horses?" I looked at the girl again but he didn't.

I wanted to hit him; I had it in my mind to swing at his pinched face but I didn't. I don't know why. He just stood there, tapping his fingers on the green knob of that cane. And smiling too, like it wasn't anything to get excited about.

He did send me the money too, not very long after that. Just an envelope with a fifty dollar bill in it and my name and address on the envelope. I took it over and bot it all on a thirty to one shot and he ran just where he should have run: dead last. But I didn't really mind that. I felt like wearing gloves all the time I had that money.

I never saw Jake again. A \$100,000 estate. But he never made it playing the horses.

## WELCOME BACK, EDDIE JARVIS

I watched Hammer wipe up the gravy from his hot beef sandwich with a piece of bread. He ate hunched over the table and went after food like he might never get another mouthful. His wife had got him to stop smoking cigarettes, but he did put away a few belts of whiskey around the barns now and then.

His real name was Jed Parline, and he was the best man around a racehorse I'd ever seen. He got the name Hammer because one of the rub-down boys had said he "looked like a god darn claw hammer." The resemblance was there: the long, hooked nose, the narrow skull, and the long curling hair behind.

I lit a cigarette and pushed my plate back, dropping the match in it. The room was filled with horsemen who were in town for the county-fair race meet. I could hear Clay Farlow's loud laugh from a corner booth and the answering manner of the voices of the men who were with him.

"Quit blowing that damn smoke in my face,"

"What?"

"I said quit blowing that smoke in my face."

I put the cigarette out in the beef gravy and leaned back in the chair.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?"

"You don't have to stall. I know that you wouldn't offer to buy me a dinner unless there was something up," he said.

"You're getting suspicious in your old age, Hammer."

"Don't you worry about my age. What's on your mind?"

"I'm going to give Eddie Jarvis the mount on Cashier tomorrow."

His jaw muscles twitched. He stuck his lower lip over his upper and his eyes narrowed. "And?" he said.

"That's all. I'm giving him the mount."

"Well, sure. You've got so much money, why should you care?"

You've been winning so many races lately that you can afford to throw one away."

"That isn't it at all. And you know that I haven't been winning many races, at least at the last two meets. My mare, Cashier, should have been in the money more times than she was. These kids..."

"Ah," he said.

"He asked for the mount," I said.

"And you gave it to him."

"Yes, I gave it to him. I owe him that much. He used to ride for my dad and he could have been one of the best."

"All right. Could have been. Listen, that purse you're going for may be only five hundred, but you can use it."

"Well, at least you won't be going against me tomorrow, Hammer."

"If I had anything that would fit I'd go against you," he said.

"Christ, Kirby, that mare deserves better than that. I know you got her ready, but there's other boys around."

"Eddie gets the mount," I said.

"When did you see him?"

"Yesterday," I said. "He came over to the barn in the afternoon and we talked."



"You talked," he said. "He must have been doing the talking and you were doing the listening. Can he make the weight?"

"He's at 120," I said.

"Will he be at 120 at post time for the sixth race tomorrow?"

"He'll be at 120," I said.

"How's he look?"

"Kind of peaked. Hamner, he deserves a chance. He took the cure and he says he can make the ride."

"Kirby, do you know how many times Eddie took the cure? The last time I saw him ride, over a year ago, he tried to get the rail and that Casey kid put him right through it. He was on a good mare and they had to take her off the track. He wound up in the hospital."

"I know all that," I said.

"I know you do, and you still want to give him the ride."

"He's got the ride," I said. "That's all there is to it. He wants the chance, he thinks he can still ride, and I'm going to let him try."

"Has he been doing anything lately?"

"He said that he's had a few mounts," I said.

"He did?"

"All right. He worked a couple horses this morning and looked good enough to me."

Hamner took a deep breath and shook his head. "I can't tell you how to run your business, Kirby. But if it was me, I'd get some other boy. How you going to tell him to ride the race?"

"I'll tell him to ride the race pretty much the way it comes up. You know if that mare wants to run he can just sit up there."

"If he don't fall off."

"He won't," I said.

"It's only six furlongs. He'll have to stay awake."

"If he can get her out in good shape, she'll run it for him.

Hammer, he needs the damned mount. I want to give him a chance to prove he can ride. Why don't you talk to him?

"Why the hell should I talk to him? He ain't riding for me."

"I know that. But he used to ride for you a lot. He rode well for you too. Just talk to him. I know he'd like to see you. He's down, Hammer."

He watched me for a while, scratching his chin and listening to the laughter from the corner booth.

"Your daddy was a good talker too, Kirby."

"A good horseman, too. Almost as good as you."

He grunted and went on scratching his chin.

"I'll talk to him. I haven't forgotten Jarvis or the way he could ride. Now let's get out of here. That damn Farlow gets under my skin."

"You'll have a chance to get under his this Saturday," I said.

"You'll be up against that good horse of his in the mile handicap. I've never seen his horse go. Is he good?"

"He's good. Too good for Farlow to have."

"Who are you going to put on him?" I said.

"Casey if I can get him. I don't think he'll ride for Farlow after that deal in Phoenix."

"Good luck," I said.

"Are you going to stay here all night?" He got up and walked

toward the door. I picked up the check, went over to pay it, and Farlow's laugh followed me out the door.

We got into my pickup and drove back to the fairgrounds. Hammer didn't say anything all the way back, and when we got there he grunted "good night" and went to his barn. I saw Eddie Jarvis asleep in the end stall where the tack was, and after checking over my five head, I crawled in the pickup camper and went to sleep.

I rolled out early the next morning. Eddie was standing in front of the mare's stall. He was scratching her nose and talking in a low voice. I went to the tap at the end of the barn, washed my face and hands, then got a saddle on my pony horse.

Eddie watched me saddle up. He dropped the light racing rig on the tail-gate of the pick-up.

"I got it ready last night," he said.

"Let's try the black colt." I went to the stall next to the mare and led the two-year old out. I held him while Eddie brought the saddle.

"You raise him?" Eddie said, watching the black colt dance and rub against the pony horse.

"Nope," I said, "I went way in hock to get that little guy. Got him last winter on the coast."

"Has he ever been out?"

"No."

"You going to send him at this meet?" Eddie said.

"No. Not on this kind of track. I want this colt to have a chance. We'll bring him along slow and try to have him ready for the winter meets."

Eddie hung on to the colt as he swung his head, jiggling to

get away, almost lifting Eddie off the ground. I gave Eddie a leg up and pulled the colt around on the left side of the pony horse, still holding on to the headstall. The colt ducked his head, rubbing against the pony horse as I mounted.

The sun was up over the hills to the east and people stood along the rail on the backstretch, watching the horses being worked. Eddie rubbed his hand along the colt's neck.

"I want to break him from the gate," I said. "He loaf's a little and has some trouble changing over on the turns. We'll see if we can get a couple of the other boys to break their horses with him. Eddie stood up in the irons, testing the gender lengths, and I saw he had no helmet.

"Where's your helmet?"

"I can borrow one," he said. "I didn't figure I would need it now." We had to wait for some horses coming along the rail before we rode on toward the gate. The gatekeeper said Clay Farlow and someone else wanted to use the gate too. They pulled the gate onto the track. I could hear Clay Farlow's laugh as he rode up on a pony so small it didn't look like it could carry the weight of him.

"Well, Kirby," he said. He watched the black colt.

"New horse?"

"Yes," I said.

"Looks like he may be all speed," Farlow said, "Probably go short, huh?"

"Could be," I said.

"Looks like a short horse to me," Farlow said.

"You want to work your horse out of the gate with him?" I said.

"Sure."

"Just a work, Farlow," I said, "Not a race."

He laughed and looked at Tattle. "Who's riding your mare this afternoon Kirby?"

I nodded at Tattle and Farlow laughed again. Tattle's lips were drawn tight and the muscles twitched in his jaw.

"I'm running my old mare in the same race, Kirby. Like to bet a little on the side?"

"Hope."

He laughed. I got down and led the colt into the fourth stall in the gate. Farlow got his horse in, a rangy lean grey that kept trying to bite everyone. Casey was riding the grey.

I straddled the chute behind Tattle and leaned over. "No race, Tattle," I said. "Just take him out as quick as you can. Stay outside all the way around and talk to him on the corners. Don't pay any attention to Casey."

He nodded his head. Farlow got his horse in the number two slot, and they loaded a bay horse on our right in number six.

The colt broke to the right, but Tattle steered him away from the bay. They went down the backstretch, lunched and going hard. I swore under my breath, but when they hit the turn Tattle had the colt taken back on the outside. The turns were tight on the half-mile track and unheeded. Before you knew it, you came right out of one turn into another. I walked away from the gate. They were coming out of the turn at the head of the stretch. The black colt started to come out a little at the head of the stretch, but Tattle got him back in. They were all under a good hold; then I could see Casey taking the grey horse back a little, steering tight to the rail.

When they go to the turn at the end of the stretch they were all running even. I could see Casey's head swinging sharply to the right to watch Eddie. The black colt moved up on Farlow's horse.

"Take him back, Eddie," I said. Farlow laughed. They went into the turn and Casey started out from the rail, taking the others with him.

"You tell him to do that Farlow?" I said.

He looked at me and didn't laugh. He pushed his hat back on his head. I looked back at the horses. Eddie had to take the black colt wide on that turn and coming in to the next one he got over on the rail. He sat there easy, not giving the colt any head, just staying tight behind the other two horses.

They were in the turn leading to the backstretch now. We stood against the rail. Casey shook his hat at the grey and the horse laid his ears back. The bay was outside him with Eddie along the rail in the rear. Eddie rode the colt out a bit and came back in the middle of the track. The colt was fidgeting and jiggling along.

"I didn't think Casey was riding for you anymore, Farlow," I said. He shrugged and stepped away from the rail. I took the black colt in hand.

Casey, a little freckled faced man with a cocky air, had a big smile on his face. The muscles in Eddie's jaw were jumping. He was looking at Casey. The colt kept fighting me and I yelled for the gate man to bring my pony.

"You haven't changed, Casey," Eddie said.

Casey shrugged, "He just went wide on that turn at the end of the stretch, Mr. Farlow," he said.

"You going to ride for Farlow, Casey?" I said.

"He asked me to work his horse," Casey said.

The gate man came up with the pony and I climbed in the saddle, yanking the black colt up tight.

"Hammer told me last night he was going to try to get you to ride Sharkey Red," I said.

"He can ride my horse," Farlow said.

"I thought maybe he didn't want to ride your horses anymore."

Farlow looked up at me. "What the hell do you mean by that, Kirby?" I knew he would like nothing better than to see me get down off the pony.

"Don't try that in a race, Casey," I said, "I'll see that you don't get another mount. Not here or at any other track."

Casey sat on the grey and looked at Farlow, but Farlow kept his eyes on me.

"I don't think you could do that, Kirby," Farlow said.

"I think I can." I turned the pony away. Farlow laughed and my neck burned.

We got back to the barn and unsaddled the black colt. I got one of the handlers to walk him. We worked the other horses in my string except for the mare; I walked her around with the pony horse for half an hour. When I got back to the barn Eddie was sitting on his bed in the tack room.

"Let's go eat," I said. He looked up at me. The corners of his mouth were turned down.

"He's a good colt, Mr. Kirby," he said. "I think he could have taken the grey horse."

"Forget it," I said.

"It wasn't you," he said.

"What?"

"It wasn't you they wanted to get to. It was me. Farlow knows I'm riding your mare this afternoon. He was trying to spook me."

"I know," I said.

"You still want me to ride?"

"Yes," I said. "Let's go eat."

When we got back I went looking for Hammer. He was lying down on a canvas cot in the shade of the barn with his hat over his face. I sat down on the edge of the cot, moving his foot over to make room.

"Resting?" I said.

"No," he said, from under the hat, "I'm sound asleep."

"I'd like to talk to you."

"You always do."

"Have you asked Casey to ride Red?"

He groaned and sat up on the edge of the cot. I leaned against the barn.

"Why?"

"I just wondered. He was riding for Farlow this morning."

He put his hat on and began to massage one of his feet. "So?"

"So I thought you said he wasn't riding for Farlow anymore."

"I said I didn't think so." He massaged his other foot.

"I had my colt out this morning and Casey tried to push him out on the corner. He rode like he had instructions."

"Well?"

"I told him that if he ever did that in a race I'd get him put



off the track."

"You taking to being a racing steward now?" he said.

"You don't like Farlow any better than I do."

"All right. I don't."

"I think Farlow told Casey to do it," I said.

"I don't doubt it."

"Then get another boy to ride Red for you."

"Kirby," he said, "Don't you think I can pick my own jockey?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll pick my own jockey."

"Does it have to be Casey?"

"No, it doesn't have to be Casey. You don't have to pussy foot either. I know what you're getting at. It's Eddie."

"Why not?"

"Kirby, sometimes I wonder why I even listen to you."

"Out of respect for my father," I said.

He put on his shoes and stood up. "I can get another boy," he said.

"I know that, Hammer. I also know Old Red means a lot to you and you want him to get a good ride."

"Most jockeys can give you a good ride. It don't matter that much."

"Then Eddie could give you a good ride."

"I said most jockeys."

"Well, at least watch him on the mare this afternoon."

"I'd watch the race without your coming around and asking me to."

"If he wins will you put him on Red?"

He grunted and looked down the line of stalls where the horses

were standing with their heads stuck out the doors.

"I'm going to the secretary's office," I said, "You want to come along?"

"No, you delivered your message." He went down the row of horses and stopped in front of Sharkey Red. The big chestnut stuck his head out at him and Hammer rubbed his nose.

"You still sleeping in his stall?" I said.

"I can't sleep anywhere anymore. There are too damn many gabby people coming by minding my business for me."

I had drawn post position five, which didn't bother me. I knew Cashier could get out all right. I went back to the barn and waited around for the races to start.

I watched the first two races but Cashier was going in the fourth, so I went back to the barn. Eddie was standing in front of the mare's stall scratching her under the chin.

"It isn't time yet, is it?" he said.

"No, not yet. We've got post number five," I said. He walked down to the black colt's stall. I could feel the tension inside me the way it always was coming up to a race. There was a newspaper lying on Eddie's cot and I tried to read through it, but there wasn't much that interested me except the news about the county race meet. There was a short article about that grand old campaigner, Sharkey Red, being on the grounds, and a picture of him with Hammer standing at his head.

I got the pony horse saddled and led the mare out. Eddie changed into his riding breeches and the crimson shirt with the gold bars that had been my dad's colors for thirty years.

The riding helmet was a little large for him. He smiled at me

and went around the corner, heading for the jockey's room.

I mounted the pony horse and rode past the barns. Two or three men yelled good luck at me as I rode. At the saddling paddock under the grandstand the tightness was worse as I led the mare in to stall number five. Farlow was next to me in number four. He had his mare saddled and was talking to the racing secretary. He looked at me when I backed the mare into the stall, but said nothing. I saddled Cashier, the secretary checked me, and I began walking her around the paddock, feeling my stomach acting up.

There were eight horses going in the race. Cashier had been out against them before, but the waiting always put me on edge. I saw Eddie standing in the stall as I led the mare around the paddock.

He was flicking his leg against his boot and looking straight ahead. His lips were tight as I gave him a leg up.

The bright sun hurt my eyes when we came out of the paddock. I led the mare onto the track and stopped there out of the way as the other horses came by me. The horses would make a turn down the stretch in front of the grandstand, then come back and go on around the track to the starting gate.

"Warn her up Eddie," I said. "I'll see you at the gate." He jogged on down in front of the grandstand. I went across the infield to the starting gate, rubbing my hands on my pants to dry them as I walked. The band began to play across the way in front of the grandstand.

The horses came around the track, far apart now as each jockey topped his horse on past the gate. I saw Hammer starting in the infield and waved him over. The mare stood quietly, waiting to go in the gate.

Eddie leaped the reins over on her neck and stood up in the irons.

He looked down at Hammer and Hammer squinted in the sunlight.

"We'll try to be in there, Mr. Kirby," Eddie said.

"You'll be in there, Eddie," I said. "Just get her out as well as you can. I'd just as soon you didn't try to go too early. Keep your eye on Julie K in the number six position. I think she's all you'll have to worry about. When she starts to move you move with her. Okay?"

"Okay," Eddie said, "How are you, Mr. Parline?"

"I'll make it, Eddie. How are you?"

"Not bad. It's good to be back."

They were having some trouble with Farlow's horse, a mousy brown filly. Eddie nudged the mare into the gate. I got up behind and tapped him on the shoulder. He slipped the goggles into place and straightened out the reins. I went to the end of the gate out of the way.

The flag went down and the horses came out with the ringing sound of the gate. The mare went good out of there, right up among them. Casey was riding Farlow's filly and he got the rail. They were going away from us down the backstretch, and I ran hard across the infield to the stretch.

They would pass the grandstand twice, going around the half mile track one and a half times. I got a position close to the rail. Farlow's horse had the lead, but was being pressed, and Casey let the outside horse go by. Eddie had the mare laying fourth and Julie K was just outside in fifth position.

I got the glasses on the horses as they swung out of the turn and into the backstretch. Farlow's horse was now third with Eddie still in fourth position. Julie K was a half-length back. The others were strung

out behind.

Running down the backstretch the second time the lead horse began to fade. Casey moved the filly up to second. Eddie stayed outside him and picked up the fading horse, moving into third position. When they hit the turn at the end of the backstretch, Casey had the lead and Eddie was moving on the second horse, but Julie K was also moving at the leaders.

They came into the turn at the head of the short stretch and it was a three horse race, with Cashier second by half a length and Julie K running even with her. I couldn't tell how they were running when they hit the stretch because they were coming straight at me, but I was sure that Farlow's horse was fading.

They were coming hard; it looked like Julie K with Cashier between horses. As they ran for the finish line it was Julie K and Cashier, and my old brown mare hung her nose out in front. I pounded the rail and hollered.

I ran through the gate at the weigh-in stand and stood on the track, waiting for the horses to make the turn at the end of the stretch and come back around to the judges stand. Hammer came out. The band started to play again. I shoved my hands down into my pockets.

"It's always the same," I said.

"Yeah, but it ain't always winning," Hammer said.

"I know. But the feeling is there. Eddie rode her right on in."

"She hung in there good," he said.

Eddie came up then and I took hold of the mare. He flicked his whip in the air and jumped down. We stripped the saddle from the mare,

and Eddie took it and weighed in while I took the mare down the track. I turned her over to a handler and went back to the judges stand.

There was a moaning sound coming from the grandstand. The inquiry sign was flashing. Our number was still up in the win position as I elbowed my way through the crowd to the racing secretary's office. Casey had filed a foul claim against Cashier, saying that she came in on him in the stretch forcing him to take up. "Farlow," I thought.

I waited around while they talked to the jockeys. I was sure there was no foul. Finally Eddie came out of the secretary's office. He was a little pale as he clutched the helmet tightly under his arm.

"It was close, wasn't it?" he said.

"It was close," I said.

"I'm glad we got it," he said, "I thought I waited a little too long. That Julie K was moving good on the outside. Casey's horse had had it. When we got between horses I thought she hung a little on me, but she came on good. I think I could have won by a bigger margin than I did if I had moved quicker."

"Could be," I said. "Anyway, we got it, and we got Farlow too. We'll send her back in four days. If they want another shot at her, we'll go out quicker. Let's go get a bear."

"No," he said, "No bear." He wiped his face with his sleeve. "I might have trouble making the weight." I watched him go through the crowd and out of sight. He stepped along quickly, flicking his boot with the bat.

Farlow was standing at the beer stand when I got there, talking to a man I didn't know. I watched the man behind the counter pour the beer into a tall paper cup. When I paid for it and turned, Farlow stood

in front of me.

"Casey says your mare came in on him," he said. He pushed his hat back and stood with his feet apart. The man he was with stepped away from him.

"The stewards didn't see it that way," I said.

"I saw it that way."

"Where were you sitting?" I said. I moved away from the counter.

"I was standing where I could see it all," he said. "You better tell that gutless wonder of yours to watch his step."

"Come off it Farlow," I said. "Eddie rode a good race. Next time you won't have a look in."

"Let me tell you something, Kirby. If you go with Jarvis on that mare again we'll put you right off the track."

"Who's we?" I said.

He tossed the paper cup he had been holding down on the concrete floor. People stopped to watch us.

"You need a lesson, Kirby," Farlow said.

I looked at the other man. He stood off to Farlow's left, smiling at me.

"I don't think you can give me a lesson in racing, Farlow," I said.

"I can give you a lesson in racing and a lesson in growing up too," Farlow said. I set myself and he came at me with his arms low and his head down. He tried to grab me, but I side-stepped him and swung into his belly. I hit him again before he got hold of me and pushed me down, using his weight to shove me over. I slumped against him and tried to roll when we hit, but he held me with one hand and pumped short punches into my ribs.

I got my knees up and into him and tried to roll free, but he stayed on top of me. I jerked to one side then heard him grunt and felt him roll free. Hammer was standing over us. I gulped the air back into my lungs and my ribs felt like I'd been kicked by a mule. Farlow was coming back at me.

"That's enough!" Hammer said.

"I can take you both," Farlow said, and came at me again. I got away from him, jerked at his arms, and spun him around. Hammer got him by the shirt and pulled him away from me.

"Damn you, Hammer, you kicked me," Farlow said.

"You're damn right I did," Hammer said, "Right where it did the most good. I would have kicked you in the head, but that wouldn't have had any effect." The man who had been talking to Farlow grabbed at his arm, but he jerked away.

"Don't butt in old man," he said.

"I ain't that old."

"Come on then," Farlow said.

I got between them. "I'll fight my own battles," I said. Farlow's friend was holding his arm now, and I saw the crowd drawn in around us. Most of them were smiling, the others just curious.

Farlow pulled away and faced me, hitching up his belt.

"I ain't going to forget this," he said.

"I hope to hell you don't," Hammer said.

"You're mixing in something that isn't any of your business, old man," Farlow said.

"Well, I'm in now. If I had anything to say about it they'd run you off this track and every other track in the country. You didn't



have horse enough today so you got to take it out on somebody."

"You taking Kirby to raise?" Farlow said.

"He don't need anybody to raise him," Hammer said, "He came here to race horses and you came here to bellyache. You keep that mouth of yours going and there won't be a track in the country that will give you stall space."

"I'll be in against you in the handicap Saturday," Farlow said.

"Don't forget it. If you put Jarvis on Red you won't have a chance."

"Anytime Red can't take you and Casey with all your dirty tricks, I'll take the horse off the track." We walked through crowd out into the sunlight, and across the track to the barns. Hammer sat down on his cot. I could hear the roar of the crowd from the grandstand as the horses went around the track. East from where I stood the cottonwood trees looked yellow in the September afternoon. Flies were buzzing along the front wall of the barn. I tried to stand straighten up, but my ribs hurt, so I leaned against the barn and looked at Hammer, who was stretched out on his cot.

"Thanks," I said, "I don't think I'd have made it."

"I know damn well you wouldn't have," he said.

"Put Eddie on Red," I said.

He rolled over on his side and looked up at me. "You never give up. I told you that it ain't that much the jockey."

"Well, you know you can't use Casey."

"Nope."

"Then use Eddie."

"You'd better watch out for that damn Farlow," he said.

"I know. I feel like all my ribs are busted loose. Did you

really boot him?"

"Yes. He didn't like it, did he?" He smiled.

"Maybe you better look out too," I said.

"He'll only try to get to me on the track," he said.

"And you're afraid he could do it if you use Eddie."

"I ain't said yet I won't use him." He lay down on his cot and put his hat over his face. I left him to look over my horses, then went to my pickup. Finally Eddie came around and we went up town and ate. Coming back he told me that Hamner had asked him to ride Sharkey Red.

Friday I ran Cashier back and Julie E didn't go this time. Eddie let Farlow's filly make the early speed and then tapped the mare at the head of the stretch. She went away from the rest of them in a hand ride. It wasn't much of a contest, but I stayed away from the beer stand anyway. Eddie had a couple of other mounts that day and didn't get in the money, but he tried hard with the horses they gave him.

That evening Eddie and I went over to see Hamner. We found him walking Red around in front of the barn. He stopped the big chestnut and several people came over to take some pictures of the horse. Red had quite a following everywhere he ran. He was a big handsome horse and had long been a crowd favorite.

He was an eight-year old gelding, which meant that even on these tracks he'd only have a couple of years left. He would go a mile once in a while, but five or six furlongs was his best distance. He liked to run as fast as he could just as far as he could. It was usually good enough. So good, in fact, that they'd put as high as 132 pounds on him a few times and he'd never packed it in.

"Well, Hammer?" I said.

"Well, what?" He put Red back in his stall and sat on the edge of his cot.

"Tomorrow is the day."

"You come to visit me, Kirby, or to put me in a bad mood?"

I stood by the barn at the head of his cot and Eddie walked down the line of horses until he came to Red's stall. He scratched the horse's nose. Red shook his head a few times, turned around in the stall and came back and poked his head out again. Hammer took off his hat and watched Eddie.

"Where you going from here?" I said.

"I'm not sure yet. I may take Red back to the ranch for a while. The old horse don't feel so good."

"I wish I had one like him that didn't feel so good."

"I hear you got a pretty good colt yourself, Kirby."

"He's only two."

He grunted, took off his boots and began to massage his left foot. The people drifted away from the barn and the three of us were left alone. I squatted down against the barn at the head of Hammer's bunk.

"Thanks for letting Eddie have the mount, Hammer."

He looked at me and began to massage his other foot. Eddie had his back to us, scratching behind Red's ears.

"I don't know," Hammer said, "It ain't that you talked me in to it so much, it's just that I don't know if it should have been done." He kept his voice low, and glanced at Eddie.

"Why?"

"A lot can happen. Farlov has to have this race and he'll be out

to win it, any way he can."

"Eddie won't get Red in trouble," I said, "Red's a speed horse. He....."

"You talk too much, Kirby."

"You said that before."

"I keep thinking about the last time when Eddie got put through the fence."

"He hasn't lost his nerve." I said.

"Maybe not. Hell, I don't know. It's just a feeling. Eddie's a good boy and it ain't that I don't trust him."

"Farlow?"

"Kirby you aren't a kid. Wake up. Farlow's a hothead. He's capable of anything."

"Hammer," I said, "I'll see you in the winner's circle."

"I just don't want it to be a horse of mine," he said quietly as Eddie came up to us.

"Wire to wire tomorrow, Mr. Parline?" Eddie said.

Hammer heaved himself back on his cot and looked up at Eddie.

"I don't know yet," he said.

"Let's go, Eddie," I said. "Hammer has to have his rest."

"You think you know all the answers, Kirby?" Hammer said.

"No," I said, "I'll just stick around you until I learn them."

We walked back to our barn and checked the horses before going to bed.

"It'll be wire to wire tomorrow," I said.

"I think you're right, Mr. Kirby. I've been on Red before. He doesn't like to look back."

He went into the tack room and I climbed in the pickup camper,

but had trouble going to sleep. I just couldn't write Harmer's remark off. I kept wondering if Farlow would try to pull something. The more I thought about it, the more it worried me. I didn't like it, but I didn't know what I could do about it. As far as I could see, the race was up to Sharkey Red and Eddie Jarvis.

My ribs still hurt the next morning when I got up. After breakfast I tried to find Harmer but was told he had gone up town. He didn't work any of the horses, just walked them around and waited for the afternoon and the seventh race.

Eddie seemed to want to talk more than usual, so we talked for a time, standing at the end o' the grandstand and watching the races until it was time for Eddie to go. I went with him back to the barns where Harmer was leading the big chestnut out of the stall into the sunlight. The sun glistened on his coat and moved calmly, blinking his eyes in the afternoon sun as if it all meant nothing to him.

"He looks good," I said.

"I don't think they'll run off and leave him," Harmer said. He scuffed the ground with his toe and I could hear the base playing across the way. I tightened up inside. Harmer looked away at the cottonwoods along the river and wiped the back of his neck with a handkerchief. I got the tack out of the barn and we walked around to the saddling paddock.

There was a big crowd gathered outside as we walked by. Some of them spoke to us, but most of them mentioned Red's name. We went inside to the number three stall and Harmer walked Red around the saddling ring. I saw Farlow coming in with his horse. It was the rangy gray that had gone wide with Gasey the day I had my colt going from the gate.

Red was an easy horse to handle; he stood quietly with his head up as we got the tack on him and slipped the bridle on. Farlow and his handler were having trouble with the grey in the number two stall. I could hear the thumping sound his hooves made as he kicked the back of the stall.

The secretary made his rounds, then the jockeys came out of the jock room and it was time to go. Eddie stood beside us and watched the other horses. He had a helmet that fit him this time, and a new pair of boots. I gave him a leg up, and he looked down at us, as Red moved in the stall.

"Now he's yours, Eddie," Hammer said.

"Okay," Eddie said.

"If you can, get the rail. You'll know what to do. You've had him before." Eddie nodded and smiled.

Hammer never had to use a pony horse for Red, so he turned him loose when we got on the track. The horses went up in front of the grandstand and started to make their turn to go around to the starting gate in the backstretch. The band stopped playing. Hammer scuffed the dirt with his toe and squinted into the sun. The announcer began to call the names of the horses and jockeys in the feature race, the six-furlong Turf Handicap. When he got to Red and spoke his name, a roar went up, and the race caller had to wait until it died down to go on with his introductions. Then he announced Eddie's name and said "Welcome back, Eddie Jarvis." Hammer and I walked across the infield to the starting gate.

There was no problem with Red; he went right in. Farlow's grey in the number two slot was trying to bite the handler. He was the last horse in and kept throwing his head.

Finally he was quiet and the bell clanged and they went from the gate down the track, boiling up the dust in the wake of their flight down the backstretch, running now in a strange quiet that left me with only the ringing of the gate still in my ears.

Farlow's grey horse got the rail and Red stayed outside him, running with him. When they hit the turn at the end of the backstretch they were going even. Casey and Eddie had a good hold on their horses.

"Casey is going to hook up with him all the way," I yelled at Hammer.

"Let's go," he said, and we ran across the infield, but didn't get to the rail in time to see them up close. They were still in tight together, with a bay horse in behind, saving ground in the stretch. We crossed the track and stood up in the front row of the grandstand and got our glasses out and watched.

Casey stayed tight on the rail, with Eddie alongside, and the bay trying to get at them without going too wide on the turn. Running down the back stretch the bay horse went to the outside and moved at them and it was now a three horse race with the others out of it.

The two leaders wouldn't let the bay go to the lead. They stayed in front of him by half a length, and midway down the backstretch I saw Casey's arm rise and fall twice as he got into the grey horse.

At the turn they were bunched, but the grey went a little wide and Eddie took Red tight to the rail. Hammer was saying over and over "Hand ride, Eddie, hand ride."

Eddie was pumping Red with his knees now but not going to the bat, and the bay horse was going again in a stretch run coming in very tight on the outside of Casey and the grey.

I saw it but couldn't say a word; the bay horse too close on the outside and Casey trying to get racing room between Red and the bay. They were halfway down the stretch and running for the wire and the sound of the crowd rose like a great sigh, as the horses pounded on.

The bay bumped Casey and he tried to straighten the grey but he was in too tight. He was forced into Eddie and tried to take up but it was too late. I saw Red jostled. He shifted stride and tried to come on again. He went to his knees, his neck, out, and Eddie was trying to lift him and Red was going over and into the white board infield fence. The grey horse fell and the others behind him rushed on. In the instant of the two horses falling I saw Eddie in the air, hanging as if suspended, the reins still in his hand, and then he disappeared.

The bay ran on crossing the finish line, and people were running past me. The race caller was asking them to clear the track. I saw Red getting to his feet in the infield and the grey horse running back up the track, head held high and to one side.

The ambulance siren sounded and people were milling around on the track. I pushed some of them aside and found Eddie lying next to the rail. His helmet was off and one new boot was twisted. He seemed to sink right into the soft surface of the track.

The ambulance attendants pushed me back and picked him up. I tried to get in the ambulance but they waved me away.

I went to the fence. Hammer was in the infield, walking Red around slowly. He stopped and picked up each one of his feet and ran a hand under his barrel. He took the tack off and led the horse up to me. I looked away at the cottonwoods shimmering yellow in the sunlight.

The band was playing again. The announcer was trying to get



people off the track. Someone pushed to the rail beside me. It was Casey. Hammer kept running his hands over Red, talking to him as the horse swung away from the crowd and the noise.

"I tried to take my horse back," Casey said. His white riding breeches were dirt-stained and his face was streaked with dust.

"I ain't blaming you, Casey," Hammer said.

"I'm sorry," Casey said. "Did Eddie make it?"

I went through the broken part of the fence and started across the infield. Hammer led Red along beside me, pulling the big chestnut horse down so that he jogged sideways.

"I'll get a vet to look at Red as soon as we get to the barn," Hammer said. "Then we can go to the hospital."

"It won't do any good," I said.

"We can go anyway."

"No. Not now. It's too late."

Hammer pulled Red away from me, and we walked like that, a little apart, back to the barn.

## THAT MEANS YOU HAVE TO

It was a grey day, with low clouds in the south and a small breeze blowing up from the river. The land along the road was nearly covered with snow, and the snow birds flitted ahead of me as I walked.

Our new place was only a short distance from town and I was bringing some medicine from the drugstore for my brother Evan. My dad was away, moving some of our stuff, and he left us to take care of the stock. I did most of the work though. Evan was pretty sick.

The road ran straight ahead and I could see our house in the distance and up at the top of the hill where the road turned abruptly to the right, there was a rider coming, his horse kicking up puffs of snow.

I stopped and watched him for a time, then I began to jog along. The horseman was nearer now, and I could tell the horse was grey; iron-grey my dad called them. The rider had the reins hanging loose and was sitting forward in the saddle, with both hands on the pommel, the way a man will do when he's cold.

When they got closer to me, they crossed over to my side of the road, and when I gave them that side, they followed me to the other, bearing down upon me. The horse minted along, shuffled sideways, stuck his neck out and bared his teeth. I stopped. There was no sound except the scraping of the grey's hoofs on the frozen road.

Ten feet away they stopped too, and the grey horse swung broadside to me, arching his neck and flicking his black tail. I saw then the strange movement of the rider's head as he swayed with the motions of the horse. His head bobbed, moved up and down as if it were on a

swivel. His hands were on the pommel of the saddle and he was hunched forward slightly.

He had on a heavy black mackinaw and one of those Scotch caps with a small tassel on the top. His boots were dark and shoved hard in to the stirrups, pushing the saddle fenders far ahead. The reins were wrapped around the horn tightly and the ends hung down, slapping against the shoulder of the horse each time it moved.

The grey horse humped and swung and I moved out into the middle of the road, but he followed me and made a quick lunge, switching his tail and pulling his lips back over his teeth.

"Hay!" I yelled, throwing up my arms, and the horse jerked back. The rider's head bobbed with the sudden motion, but he said nothing. The horse held his head high, blowing the air hard through his nostrils with a popping sound that came like a series of shots on the cold air.

The grey stuck his neck way out and moved his head from side to side, and rolled his eyes. He was really rank now, and breathing harshly with a whistling sound. I wanted to run, but I just stood there. I yelled again, but the rider said nothing. He sat with his dark-whiskered chin on his chest, swaying easily in the saddle as the horse jiggered beneath him.

I moved as the horse moved, side to side in the center of the road. Right to left we went, poised like two dancers. Then he lunged.

He screamed and was on top of me before I could avoid his rush. I had both hands up and turned into him, trying to brace my shoulder for the shock. Even as the scream was extended and carried on the air and I smelled saddle oil, he swung away again wheeling suddenly, hoofs

scraping on the frozen ground, so that, hands high in the air, what I caught was not horse but dark rider who toppled over on top of me, knocking me back and down.

Even in falling, in feeling the shock of the rider hitting my arms and shoulders and chest and bearing me down, I saw that terrible horse, wheeling, not running but drifting away. Head held high he left the road, broadside to me, and the snow flew from his hoofs. He held his head out to the side and the reins streamed away from him. He drifted, left the road, crossed the barrowpit, leaping in dark motion against the snow-whitened field the fence at its edge.

The rider sprawled across my legs, face down in the snowy road. His cap had been knocked off in the fall, and his arms were flung wide. Despite his size he was surprisingly light and I sat up and rolled him over and stood above him. His features were half covered by a dark beard and there was blood collected at the corners of his mouth. He was breathing very softly. I didn't want to touch him again after seeing the blood. Finally I bent over him and saw that his hands were bloody and the blood had frozen on them and cracked when they were torn loose from the saddle horn.

I opened the black coat, stiff as a horse blanket, and then the shirt. I wiped my hands quickly on my pants. He was covered with blood; it ran down his belly and over his ribs. He looked like he might have been shot several times, but I didn't touch his chest to find out. His hair was long and tangled, and his face looked as if the features were glued tightly to the bones.

I got up and looked at the grey horse, standing about fifty yards away in the field. He pawed the ground as I walked toward him,

and when I got to the fence he wheeled away from me. I turned and went back to the man lying in the middle of the road. Finally I dragged him off the road and ran the remaining quarter of a mile to the house.

I got a saddle on old Midge and left her standing at the back door with her rump against the wind, blowing harder now from the south. Inside in the living room Evan was lying half-covered on the couch, and one arm was hanging down. I knew he was very sick but I woke him up and told him and he sat up and put on his shoes without saying anything. I waited while he got on his old sheepskin and then we went outside. He got in the saddle and I got on behind and kicked Midge into her fastest gait, a lumbering old-horse-tired lope.

We got to the rider and boosted him across the saddle and Evan held him on. The grey horse stood away from us out in the field, pawing the snow. I ran beside Midge back to the house and we got the man inside the living room. We stretched him out on the floor and I saw he had lost his Scotch cap.

"Light the lamp." Evan said.

I got the old Aladdin lamp going and brought it over and set it down along side Evan, who was on his knees. He bent over and put his ear right up to the man's lips.

"Get back on that horse and go to town and get a doctor out here," he said. I looked down at the man on the floor.

"Get that doctor,"

I left them there in the small soft circle of light and tried to hurry Midge the mile and a half to town. We passed the place where the man had fallen, and I looked at the grey horse as I rode past. He had

his head high and was pawing the ground, but he didn't come up to the fence. The popping sound came from his nostrils and he swung his head up and down.

I asked a man on the street where the doctor was and found the house, a big old two-story white one on a side-street. The doctor listened to me while he put on his hat and coat, puffing on the biggest cigar I'd ever seen. He waved me out, and I climbed on Midge and started back. Before I got to the schoolhouse at the edge of town he passed me, honking the horn of his old Ford.

It was getting dark when I got to the house and I could smell the cigar smoke when I went into the living room. The doctor was putting on his hat and coat. Evan was sitting over on the couch, out of the circle of light.

The doctor looked at me when I came in, then bent over and closed up his little case.

"Is he all right?" I said.

The doctor took his cigar out of his mouth and looked at it for a minute. "He's dead," he said.

I felt weak and I wanted to sit down, but there was no chair and I kept looking down at the man on the floor. His coat was buttoned again and his arms were at his sides.

The doctor cleared his throat and pushed the black bag away with his foot.

"Give me a hand," he said, "Take his feet."

"What?" I said.

"Take his feet," the doctor said, but I just kept staring down at the face.

"I'll help you," Evan said, and coughed in the darkness from the couch.

He came across the bare floor and was breathing hard as he bent over.

The doctor had the man's shoulders off the floor, but he stopped and listened to Evan's breathing.

"You feel all right?" he asked.

"Yes," Evan said, and picked up the man's legs. I saw the blood on the floor when they moved him.

I followed them outside and watched while they put him into the back of the car. It was dark now, and the wind was coming up harder. The cottonwoods creaked and I could hear a calf bawling.

"Who was he?" Evan asked.

"His name was Tobe Julian," the doctor said.

"I wonder who shot him?"

"I don't know," the doctor said. "Likely the law will find out. I just patch them up if I can."

"What about his horse?" I said.

"Don't worry," the doctor said. "It will go home. You probably won't have to bother with it."

"I don't think we could catch it," I said. I felt like talking.

The doctor started his motor and turned on his lights. We stood there and watched him out of sight.

"Do you think he wouldn't have died if the doctor could have been here sooner, Evan?" I said.

We were standing close together in the darkness and the branches

of the cottonwood made rasping sounds as they rubbed together over our heads.

I wanted Evan to touch me but he didn't. I heard his hard breathing and he turned toward the house.

"He was shot up too bad to live," he said. "Go put up the mare."

I stood where I was, my back to him. "That doctor didn't seem to care," I said.

"They get used to it," Evan said.

Evan coughed in the darkness and I shivered inside my mackinaw. I didn't feel like being alone right then. I didn't feel like unsaddling Midge in the dark.

"Take Midge to the barn. You rode her pretty hard."

I took the old mare to the barn, fed her, and rubbed her dry, and then stood beside her for a while, listening to her eat. Finally I opened the barn door, closed it behind me, and ran to the house.

I didn't take my coat off, but went straight to the living room. Evan had moved the couch to the center of the room where the man had lain, and had put the lamp at one end. He looked up at me.

"You hungry?" he said.

"No."

"Well, I'm not very hungry either. I put some coffee on though."

"I don't want any coffee either," I said.

Evan didn't answer so I went over and sat down under the light. There was a pile of old magazines between us on the couch, and Evan was looking through one of them, turning the pages rapidly.

"Evan," I said.



He looked at me. "You cold?" he said.

"Yes. Evan, I ain't going to sleep in here tonight."

He sat there for a long time, looking at me. Then he put the magazine down.

"I know how you feel," he said.

"Do you? Do you really?" I said.

"Well, maybe not really," he said. "But I've got a good idea. Where are you going to sleep?"

"I don't know. Maybe nowhere. But I can't sleep in here. I've got a feeling I should be outside."

"I'll fill the lantern," he said, and went into the kitchen, returning after a while with the Coleman lantern already lit.

"You be careful," he said. "There's hay in the barn."

"I know," I said. I took the lantern and walked fast to the barn, carrying some blankets with me.

I set the lantern down in Midge's grain box and rubbed her soft nose. She wiggled her lips at me and blinked her eyes in the light. I turned the lantern out, set it over in the next stall and rolled up in the blankets in the manger. The wind blew a loose door open and shut in the hay-mow, and I could hear old Midge above me, rustling around. The wind was still thumping the hay-mow door when I finally fell asleep.

The next morning I woke up early. Midge was rumaging around in the manger, trying to shove my legs aside to get at the hay leaves. I got up and untied her halter rope and led her outside. It was cold and there was no wind at all. I jumped on Midge and kicked her into her old-bones rope.

I kept looking out into the field but the grey horse was gone.

When I got to the place where it had happened, I got off and looked on both sides of the road. I remounted Midge and rode up and down on either side, then I finally turned for home. I took one last look out into the field, waiting tense and stiff for the sound of that iron-grey horse. I let Midge pick her own gait back to the barn.

When I got to the house I took my coat off and hung it on the back porch. Evan was in the kitchen mixing up some pancake batter.

"I was looking for his cap," I said. "He was wearing a scotch cap. Must have blown away."

"Must have," he said.

"The horse was gone too."

He nodded and poured out the batter into a skillet. I could smell the bacon frying on the back of the stove.

"That was a funny horse," I said.

"Funny?" Evan said.

"Yeah. Strange and wild. I thought for a while he wanted to bite me. Maybe he knew."

"Knew what?" Evan asked.

"That the man was dying," I said. I sat down at the table.

"That's probably true," Evan said.

He set the table and put some more wood in the cookstove. Then he put the pancakes and bacon on the table and sat down on the other side of the table.

"Tobe Julian is an odd name, isn't it Evan?"

"Well, it isn't a usual name, Not Tobe anyway."

I got up and sat down again at the table. "I'm not very hungry," I said.

"You figuring on working on an empty stomach?"

"Maybe," I said. "Evan?"

"Yes."

"That's the first dead man I ever saw. And he fell right on top of me."

Evan stopped eating and took a drink from his coffee cup, looking at me over the top of it.

"I don't feel right about it. I can still see that grey horse and ...."

"You going to sleep in the barn again tonight?" Evan asked.

"I don't know," I said.

Evan got up and took his plate to the stove.

"If you aren't going to eat, you'd better go out and feed those cows," he said.

I sat there and looked at him.

"I think I'll have some coffee," I said.

He poured some from the pot and put it back on the stove.

"I'll just have to get it straight in my mind," I told him.

"You will," Evan said.

"That means I have to, don't it?" I said.

"That means you have to," he said. "Now, are you going to eat?"  
He turned back to the stove.

"Oh hell, I suppose," I said as I helped myself to the pancakes and bacon.

## THE ROSEBUSH BRANCH

It was an August afternoon, a warm, idle kind of day, and I didn't feel like working on the books. There had been few customers during the afternoon, and I felt like going fishing on the river. Some flies buzzed around me at the counter, and I walked to the window of the store and looked out on the street of the town. All I had to do was close my eyes and I could see myself moving my fly line in the shade of the old silver bridge, and hear the water running into and out of the big riffles.

Jim drove up in front of the blacksmith shop across the street, and I called Marian from the back of the store where she was adding up the columns of figures in the green ledger. Jim had a lever and a piece of flat metal in his hand. I thought if he had broken down he might quit for the day and we could try our luck fishing on the river. Before Marian could protest about the book-work, I went out of the door and across the street.

Arnie came out of his store and joined Jim. The two of them stood in the shade of the blacksmith shop, talking. A liquor salesman came out of Arnie's store and put his books in the back of his car. He joined Jim and Arnie just as I got there. He leaned against the wall and lit a cigar, and looked up and down the street.

"I wish I could break down in the afternoon anytime I wanted to," I said.

"You've got to work to break down," Arnie said.

"Did you break down, Arnie?" I said.

"Not, isn't it," the salesman said.

Jim was running his fingers through his hair and rubbing the

corners of his mouth where the dust from the fields had collected and dried. He sat down and stretched his legs out in front of him, and put his battered straw hat on the sidewalk beside him.

"Let's go fishing," I said. I squatted down beside him.

"Can't," Jim said. "As soon as Shorty gets that lever fixed I've got to get back out there and get over the rest of my summer fallow. It won't be long now till I have to start combining."

"One day won't matter," I said.

Arnie was picking his teeth and looking down the street toward the river. Finally he sat down on my left and began to rub his right shoulder. I knew he would go fishing if he could find someone to go with him. All he needed was an excuse. His wife would always run the store if he wanted to go.

"Some people just can't go fishing anytime they want to," he said.

"Well, Arnie," I said, "I wouldn't know about that. I'm not on the state payroll. I have to run my own business."

"Hell," Jim said, "You guys don't have to worry. Us farmers do all the worrying for you. We buy your hardware and your booze. You just tote it up and ask us for the money."

"Sure," I said, "But I have to wait all year for my money. Arnie there doesn't have to give it a thought. That check comes every month in the mail. It doesn't matter if he sells any of that stuff or not. Volume is what I work on."

"Me too," the salesman said, and knocked the ash from his cigar. He didn't sit down, but stood a little away from us.

"Well, it sure as hell is hot," Jim said. "Out on that tractor it's even hotter."

"Just think of that cool water and that cold beer," I said. "Of course Arnie doesn't get to turn in a report on beer. We'd have to go to Brownie's Bar to get the beer."

"You give these guys a college education and the old man's business and all they got to do is sit around and figure it all out," Arnie said. We sat in the shade of the blacksmith shop and looked at the street and at the hills to the north.

"I hope it don't rain for a while," Jim said. "This time of year I'm afraid of hail. I've got a lot of wheat and barley to get cut."

"We could use some rain," I said.

"I'd rather it waited until after harvest."

Arnie stood up and rubbed his shoulder. "I've got to go back to work," he said. "Let me know if you decide to go fishing. Maybe I can get my wife to watch the store."

"I think you might be able to," I said.

He stood there for a minute, rubbing his shoulder and looking down at me. He had bursitis and it bothered him a great deal.

"Maybe you ought to go back in the store and rest," I said. "You're too old to go tramping up and down that river anyway."

"Not too old to beat you on the river. Jim and I have read that river water all our lives. You haven't lived here long enough to know the river very well. Or anything else either." He walked up the street to the liquor store.

"Nice little town you've got here," the salesman said.

"We like it," I said.

"Good place to raise kids."

"True enough. Nothing much happens here, though."

"A sleepy town?"

"Right again. I doubt if there has been anything that has happened in this town in the last 50 years that could shake it awake."

"That a fact?" The salesman said.

He went on smoking his cigar. Jim wiped his forehead and I looked down the street in the direction of the river. Across the tracks that ran parallel to the highway were the houses of the town, set in neat rows, like crosses in Flanders.

Some kids were sitting on the sidewalk across the street from us, dangling their feet in the little concrete irrigation ditch that ran down through the town and under the highway and railroad track to the houses. The sunlight shimmered and danced into heat waves along the street, and the kids were giggling as they pushed each other into the little ditch.

"Here comes Hank," Jim said, and got to his feet. "I've got to go see how Shorty is coming with that lever." He went inside the blacksmith shop.

I looked across the street and saw Hank in front of Brownie's Bar, weaving in the hot sunlight. He saw the children and went over and sat beside them. He took off his shoes and socks and put his feet in the water. The children laughed and stood away from him in a small group.

"Is he loaded?" the salesman said.

"He makes a habit of being loaded," I said. "It's an everyday occurrence with Hank." A block up the street I saw Harold rounding the

corner with his odd, shuffling gait. Down the street he came, the blooming branch of a rosebush in his hand. He twirled it like a baton and then stuck it under his arm as if it were a swagger stick.

The bright sun swept along the street, dancing in the distance above the highway and the railroad tracks. I leaned back and looked up at the sky. There were only a few small white clouds that seemed to hang in the light blue sky. The hills to the north were dry and brown and the alfalfa fields seemed to run right up to them.

The children looked up and saw Harold and began to giggle and point at him briefly, then away again down the street.

"Who is that?" the salesman said, pointing with his cigar.

"That's Harold," I said.

Jim came back out of the blacksmith shop and sat down beside me. He looked at the children and at Hank, who had rolled up his pants legs to the knee. Jim took off his hat and laid it on the sidewalk beside him and I looked up the street at Harold.

"Is there something the matter with him?" the salesman said.

"He's inbred," I said.

"You're just full of information," Jim said.

"Just passing the time of day," I said. "Are we going fishing?"

"I don't see how I can," Jim said. "This will be my last chance to get over that summer fallow. I'll have to start fixing up my combine."

"Inbred?" the salesman said.

"His father and mother were cousins," I said.

"I wonder what makes them do that?" the salesman said.

"I've known him all my life," Jim said. "He doesn't bother anyone."



"There ought to be enough people to go around though," the liquor salesman said. Harold had stopped and was swinging the branch around in front of him like a Fourth of July sparkler.

"There should be," I said.

Harold started on down the street toward Hank and the children. He twirled the rosebush baton and bobbed his head up and down as if in time to some imaginary music. He shuffled along, dragging his heels on the cement, and stopped under the awning in front of my store. He jiggled up and down and bent over to see his reflection in the window. At last, as if satisfied with what he saw, he nodded and went on, swishing the pink blossoms of the rosebush in front of him.

As he turned away from the window I could see the sun reflecting on the thick lenses of his glasses, and I watched his head bob up and down. Noises came from his open mouth, "Ah, ah, ah," and he moved his shoulders in time to his shuffling feet.

"He probably got that branch from one of Hank's rosebushes," Jim said.

"The drunk guy?" the salesman said.

"He raises roses," Jim said.

"Between drunks," I said.

"No," Jim said, "He's always raised roses. As long as I can remember he had a lot of them growing around the place. He's pretty proud of them."

"You have an odd town here," the salesman said.

"Odd?" I said. "Maybe. There are more odd people in the cities, if that's what you mean by odd. The only difference is that there are more of them there. It makes a group and then they aren't interesting

anymore."

"Arnie was right," Jim said.

"About what?"

"You know all the answers."

We watched Harold stop in front of Brownie's Bar, where Hank still sat, cooling his feet in the ditch. Harold waved the branch at the children who huddled in their group and tried to step on each other's bare feet. I could feel the sweat run down my back and I looked down the street toward the river. A truck was coming up the river road and the dust boiled up behind it like the wake from a boat. Harold walked up to the screen door of the bar and stood there, looking inside.

In the next block up the street the Reverend Tyler came out of his church and walked around to the back. I raised up to a squatting position and kept thinking about how good it would be to be on the river.

"The Reverend has finished his sermon for Sunday," Jim said.

"Either that or he's been inside swatting flies around the pulpit," I said. "There's more flies in that church on Sunday than parishioners."

"He's bringing his lawn mower," Jim said.

The Reverend Tyler came into sight again from the back of the church. He had a goat on the end of a long rope and the goat was on its knees, pulling back against the rope.

"He'll never get that goat broke to lead," I said.

Reverend Tyler tied the goat in front of the church and went back inside.

"I was wrong," Jim said. "He hasn't finished the sermon."

The liquor salesman cocked his hat over one eye and cleared his

throat. He took his cigar out of his mouth, looked at it, then adjusted himself against the building.

The truck was gone from sight, but the dust, like a lingering smoke, was still in the air. The children were down the street a few feet from Hank, splashing water over each other. Hank went on soading his feet and laughing at them. Harold had turned away from the door of the bar and was watching the children, the roses hanging down by his side.

"Hank has noticed him," Jim said.

Hank had turned around and was looking at Harold. The children stopped fidgeting and stood together in a tight group, away from the water.

Hank stood up in the irrigation ditch. Harold began to swing the branch again, and took a few steps toward Hank. He swung the branch around and around and the blossoms danced close to Hank's face. Each time Harold swung the branch Hank would slap at it as if it were a fly.

Hank began making a sound like a mad bull, bellowing, and the children began to edge away down the street. The Reverend Tyler came out of his church. He stood looking down the street at the sight of Hank standing in the ditch and yelling at Harold.

The salesman stepped away from his position against the front of the blacksmith shop and Jim heaved himself up to a squatting position, rolling and unrolling the brim of his straw hat. Arnie came out of the liquor store and walked down to stand beside the salesman.

"He's got some vocabulary," the salesman said. "What do you think he'll do?"

"Who?" I said.

"The guy you said raised the roses. The one doing all the holler-ing."

"Nothing," I said. I got up and stretched. Jim looked at me but I paid no attention to him. Hank was going strong now, and I listened to him.

"Harold! Damn you! Did you get that from my rosebushes?" he said.

Harold stood in front of Hank, waving the branch, twirling it between his thumb and forefinger. His mouth was open and he said "Ah, ah, ah," and shuffled his feet. Hank stepped up on the sidewalk and the branch flicked close to his face. He reached out toward Harold, motioning toward himself with his other hand.

"You gimme that, Harold," he said.

"Ah, ah, ah," Harold said. His jaws were working and he tried to say the words that came only as sounds.

"Hank," Jim called, but Hank did not hear, or if he did he paid no attention. Jim stood up and walked to the edge of the sidewalk. The salesman cleared his throat. I stayed in the shade.

"You give me that or I'll break your head," Hank yelled. He moved toward Harold who retreated until he came up against the front of Brownie's Bar.

The Reverend Tyler began to walk down the street and Jim stepped off the curb. Arnie moved out into the sunlight and stood there, rubbing his shoulder. When Hank moved I didn't expect it at all. He leaped at Harold and began to flail with his hands. Harold ducked down and the roses flew high in the air.

Someone screamed. By the time I got to the middle of the street,

Jim and Arnie and the bartender from Brownie's were already there, pushing and yelling and grunting.

I got there just ahead of the Reverend Tyler and just behind the salesman. Hank was lying on the sidewalk and his hands were clenched tightly at his throat. The blood was seeping through his fingers and his mouth was open.

Harold was slumping against the front of the bar and Arnie had a hold of his hands and was talking to him. The blood was really pumping out between Hank's fingers.

"Good God," the salesman said.

I could hear the children crying and a woman was trying to quiet them, saying "Hush. Hush now. Run along home now. It's all right. Go home now."

Jim was kneeling beside Hank, bending over him and holding his shoulders off the sidewalk.

"Get a doctor. Someone get a doctor," the salesman said. The crowd from the bar came out and stood to one side. Someone said "There isn't any doctor here."

"Hank. Hank. Can you hear me, Hank?" Jim was saying. Hank's head began to roll from side to side and the blood made a pool on the sidewalk. The Reverend Tyler pushed some men aside and knelt down by Jim.

"Go back in the bar boys," the bartender said. The men didn't move.

"We better call the sheriff," one of the men said.

"Pick him up," the bartender said, and some of them carried Hank inside.

The rest of the men went back in the bar and the bartender followed them. Arnie had his arm around Harold's shoulders and kept talking to him. I just stood there, and finally Arnie and Harold walked across the street to the liquor store.

"Jesus," the liquor salesman said, "he bit the whole throat right out of him."

The children were gone now, fled away into the houses across the tracks, set as neatly as rows of crosses in a cemetery. The Reverend Tyler stood watching Arnie and Harold. He shook his head and began to walk slowly back up the street to his church.

I picked up the roses, wilting now in the heat of the afternoon. The salesman hurried across the street to his car. I blinked my eyes against the sun, shimmering in the distance. My lips were dry and the sweat ran down my back.

"I guess you didn't have this figured out," Jim said. I turned to look at him but he was already on his way to the blacksmith shop. I stood alone on the street with the roses in my hand.

## AND NOW WE'LL PLAY A MAN'S GAME

We sat our horses on the ridge above Robinson Draw and watched the clouds building up over the mountain. The wind blew through the lodgepoles and two magpies whirled in the air, away into the dark grove of pines. The November sun was gone in late afternoon and the camp robber birds that had shrilled at us throughout the day were silent as if the coming evening left nothing more to chatter at.

We'd been there three days, working the mountain in circles, and seeing nothing but old elk sign. We figured to stay one more day, and, if we couldn't get an elk, settle for a mule piece and go home.

The horses moved nervously beneath us as Ben looked through his binoculars at the upper slopes.

"It looks like Nick and Bill must have gone over in Line Creek Canyon," Ben said at last, putting the glasses back in the case.

"Could be," I said. "But it sounded like those shots came from up the slope."

"Well, professor, those clouds have snow in them and we better head for camp. Even if they did get into some elk they'll probably be back by the time we get there. I don't think they'll figure to try to get them out tonight."

"All right," I said, and turned the mare downhill. "Let's go. I'm getting stiff sitting here."

Ben grinned. "That teaching has softened you up," he said.

"Something has," I said. "Anyway, I'm tired."

It was nearly dark when we got back to the hollow where we had the tent pitched. Bill and Nick's horses were unsaddled and standing in the lean-to. We didn't see any elk or deer hanging. We unsaddled

our horses, rubbed them down, tied them inside the lean-to and walked to the tent.

"Going to be a lot more snow on the ground in the morning," Ben said over his shoulder, as he ducked down to go under the tent flap.

Inside it was a lot warmer, or it seemed so even though they hadn't started a fire in the little heating stove.

Ben looked in the grub box and finally straightened up. "Where's the whiskey?"

Bill, tall and lanky was sprawled on his sleeping bag at one end of the tent, and Nick lay across from him, his hat over his face.

"Where's the whiskey?" Ben said again. "And the game. We heard shots."

Bill raised up and held a bottle aloft. "Here's the whiskey," he said. "Ask the hunter there where the game is." He motioned over at Nick, who rolled over and sat up.

Ben got the whiskey bottle and I handed him two cups. He poured into them and sat down on the grub box under the light. I stood to one side, took a drink and let the whiskey warm me.

Nick scratched at the sketchy growth of blond beard on his face, then got up and walked over and poured whiskey into his cup.

"Bill got mad at me," he said, moving back to his sleeping bag and sitting down on it.

"You get an elk?" Ben asked.

"I didn't get an elk," Bill said. "Hell no! The hunter there got in a hurry and shot a cow elk I saw first, while the bull was standing there in the shade looking at us. I didn't even get down off my damn horse!"



"I can't figure what he's sore at," Nick said, looking over at Bill. "Neither one of us saw that bull. We came up here to hunt elk and I shot one."

He looked back at Ben, who sat with his hat on the back of his head and his heavy coat open. I went over and started poking kindling into the little stove and lit a match to it, waiting on my heels for it to draw before I threw in a couple of chunks.

"Yeah. We came to hunt elk. I told you to wait a minute. Why the hell did you get in such a hurry?" Bill stood up and took off his coat and rolled it up at the head of his bed. He walked over to the grub box and Ben handed him the bottle.

Nick sighed and scratched at his face. "We went all over that on the way back," he said.

Bill went back to the corner. "I'm not satisfied," he said.

I put some more wood in the heating stove and Ben got up and brought the small two-burner gas stove and set it down on the grub box.

"Don't matter that much, I guess," he said. "Only thing is we'll have more snow to buck to get it out in the morning."

"I'm not going back up there in the morning," Bill said. "It's his elk. Let him get it out."

"Well, you let me gut her out by myself," Nick said. "I suppose I can drag her back with no help from you."

Ben and I took off our coats and started to get supper. We cooked up some eggs and bacon and washed it down with more whiskey. After we ate we sat on our beds and listened for the wind outside, but it had died down.

After a while Ben stood up and headed for the front of the tent.

"I'm going to take a look at the horses," he said, and waited at the entrance. I went on heating up water for the dishes and finally Nick got up and he and Ben went outside together.

"That guy gets under my skin," Bill said. He lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of his bed. "You remember that time when we went over on Crooked Creek to hunt deer and he shot that doe and expected me to put my tag on it?"

"I remember," I said. "It was the last day of the season."

"And he tried to tell us all it was an accident. Said he hadn't meant to shoot the deer at all,"

"You two never did get along too well," I said, wiping my hands on the dish towel. I sat down on the grub box and lit a cigarette.

"Are you just beginning to notice?" he said. Then he smiled and held out his cup and I walked over and poured some from the bottle into it. He reached out for the bottle and held it up against the light. "Not much left in there. I got another one in the pickup." He got up and put on his coat and hat and stopped way over to go out the tent.

I listened but there was no wind at all now and I knew without getting up and going to look out that it was snowing. We'd have to put chains on to get out, but I knew we'd make it. We always did with Ben along.

Ben and Nick came back into the tent. They had never seemed like brothers, at least physically. Ben was taller and darker and was the older of the two. Nick was blond and quick-tempered, not deliberate the way Ben was. He was single and lived with Ben and his family on a small cattle ranch.

"Well, it's here," Ben said, knocking the snow from his coat

and tossing his hat over on his bed. "Likely snow all night." The coat followed the hat and he moved to the grub box.

"Bill went to get another bottle," I told them.

"I hope he's got plenty," Nick said. "We might be here for a long time and a poker game doesn't amount to much without whiskey."

"Nick," Ben said.

Nick acted as if he hadn't heard, taking off his coat and hat and sitting on his bed. He scratched his Adams apple and reached over for his rifle. He worked the action a few times and grinned at Ben.

Bill came back in the tent carrying a bottle and his hat was covered with snow. "Those flakes are getting bigger all the time," he said. "Morning in this country is going to look a hell of a lot like winter."

He opened the bottle and handed it to me and Ben to fill our cups. When we had filled them he looked over at Nick and then set the bottle down at my feet.

Nick grinned and went on cleaning his rifle. He swabbed out the barrel and went over the outside of it with a rag.

"I hope you people brought along plenty of money," he said, and stood up and stretched. "It may be a long winter just feeding cows. I might like to get down to Billings once in a while. Takes money to move in that town and I like to move." He came over to the box and the light from the lantern caught his blond hair and sparse beard. "How about it, Charlie? You want to get your feet wet in a small game?"

"Remember the last time we played in the back of Aldo's and you went home broke and unhappy?" I said.

"Charlie, my boy, I have learned since then."

"Have you learned that two-pair isn't a bluffing hand in a stud game when you're beat in sight?" Ben said. Nick flushed and tightened his lips.

"It wasn't the competition, dear brother, only the night. It just wasn't my night."

"And how do you know tonight will be any different?" I asked.

"Just a feeling I have, Charlie, old professor. Just a feeling I have that tonight will be a night to remember." He reached down and pulled me off the box and lifted the lid, looking around inside for the deck of cards.

Bill had taken his rifle from the corner of the tent and was wiping it with a rag, running it up and down the barrel several times and turning it this way and that to catch the lantern light on the metal.

"Shall we play, gentlemen? Two-bit limit and dealer's choice?" Nick riffled the cards in his hands, snapping them and shuffling them as if he could make them come to life.

Ben went over and put some more wood in the stove and hung the lantern on a longer rope just above the big box.

"Remember, Nick," I said, "it isn't my fault you're such a lousy poker player. Or is it that you just have lousy luck?"

Nick was sitting down, dealing the cards, looking for the first Jack to deal.

"You'll find it isn't luck at all, Charlie. It's destiny. Shall we play with three or four?"

Ben and I looked over at Bill as he held up the rifle and sighted through the barrel at the lantern. He rubbed it over again a few more

times with the rag, tilting it this way and that and letting the light flicker over it, taking his time. He finally got up, took out a cigarette and lit it and came over to the improvised table.

"Might as well," he said. "Only this will be just like shooting fish in a barrel."

"Well, well," Nick said, "Will you look at who got the first Jack. I tell you gentlemen, this is going to be some night." He pulled in the cards and began to shuffle them. "Ante your money, gamblers, and we'll play a little man's poker."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Why stud, of course. Stud is a man's game."

We played and Nick won and the cards passed to Bill for his deal.

"Draw," he said and we played draw, and Nick won again.

I dealt draw when it came my turn and had three tens and lost to Ben's three Queens.

Nick smiled and lit a cigarette and poured himself a drink from Bill's bottle. "Two out of three, gentlemen, two out of three."

Bill reached across him and picked up the bottle and poured the rest of us a drink.

Ben dealt and this time I won on two pair at draw. Then Nick picked up the cards and shuffled them rapidly and set them down in front of Ben for the cut.

"And now for the man's game again. Stud poker."

"So you can see everything in sight but one card," Bill said.

"It's that one that does the job. All that it takes is one. Just one." Nick poured out some more whiskey and set the bottle down

beside his foot.

"You keep belting that whiskey like that and you won't even be able to see those cards in a couple more hands," Ben told him.

Nick grinned, scratched his chin, and dealt the hand and won again. "I hate to rub it in, mon, but you can see how it goes."

The game settled down after that and we played steadily, stopping now and then to say whether we would raise or call or to pour another drink from the bottle. After several hands, Ben pushed back from the table.

I looked at my watch.

"What time's it getting to be?" He said.

"Almost 10 o'clock."

Ben stood up. "I think I've had enough for one night. I'm going to take a look at the horses."

I stood up. "I'll go with you. I think I need some air." Outside the snow was falling heavily and we couldn't see anything at all. The beam of Ben's flashlight seemed to disappear three feet from the lens. We went into the lean-to and stood in the darkness, listening to the sound the horses made.

"They know they better fill up," Ben said. "It may be a tough day for them tomorrow."

We walked back to the tent. Just before we went inside Ben stopped me. "You going to play anymore?"

"Not me," I said. "I'm tired. Why?"

"Just wondered. I don't want them two to get to arguing. They might if that damn game goes on." We entered the tent.

Bill had returned to his bed and was sitting on its edge; smoke

from his cigarette curled up into the darkness along the ridgepole.

Nick was still at the grub box, sitting cross-legged and picking up and dropping the coins. "Well, players? Is the game over?"

"You've improved, Nick, or your luck has." I took off my coat and hat and sat down on my bed in the shadows.

"Skill, Charlie, skill."

Bill cleared his throat.

"Nick," Ben said. Nick was grinning and scratching his face.

"I don't think it was skill. I think it was pure luck," Bill said. He had taken the cigarette out of his mouth and was watching Nick.

"And I say it was skill."

"And I say the game's over," Ben said. "I'm going to turn in. We're going to have to get up that mountain early and get an elk loaded. That snow could last for several days."

"I'm not going after any damn elk with him, anytime. I want that understood." Bill had his feet under him as if he were going to get up. "I don't give a damn if he is your brother. He's lucky in a lot of ways. One of them is that somebody hasn't shut his mouth."

"Let them go after the elk, Bill," I said. "You and I'll stay here and get things ready to move out."

"I don't need your help," Nick said. "I don't need it at all."

"Nick," Ben said, "That's enough. You two don't want to get along, all right. But let it go until some other time. This is no place for it."

"Any time is all right with me," Nick said. "And I don't need your advice either, Ben. I can take care of him myself. All by myself."

I grabbed Bill before he could get to Nick, trying to push him back on the bed but he was too strong for me and broke loose. Ben got in front of the two of them and pushed Nick over in the corner. He turned to face Bill. Bill looked at him for a long time, then went back to his bed. I went to the corner by Nick's bed.

"We've been friends a long time, Ben," Bill said. "Even if he's your brother you know he's out of line and I'm through going on trips with you and trying to get along with him." He sat down with his back to us and started to take off his clothes. "I'll just get my gear together in the morning and leave. But that son-of-a-bitch had better stay away from me!"

"No need to do that Bill. We'll all go back together. Now Nick, you think you've shot off your mouth enough to ruin this hunting trip or do you want to keep on?"

Nick didn't say anything. He sat down on his bed and started unlacing his boots. He picked up his rifle and started wiping it off again. I took off my boots and lay down on top of the sleeping bag, listening to Nick work the action of the 30-06 from time to time as he polished the gun.

Bill still had his back to me and I rolled over and took off my glasses and laid them down beside the sleeping bag, and closed my eyes. Ben moved past the end of my bed. He sat down on his cot, facing me. I could hear the snicking of Nick's rifle as he ejected the shells, put them in again and ejected them. I was going to raise up and tell him to get in bed when the shot came.

I sat up in bed. Ben came off his bed fast, moving past Nick, sitting on the edge of his bunk with the rifle in his hands. He had



his mouth open.

Ben held Bill's head up and I could see the blood on his face. The movement came so quickly that I could not follow all of it. I saw the rifle wrenched away and sent spinning, but I did not see the blow that sent Nick to the floor. I started to get up but sat back down.

"I didn't mean to, Ben. I swear I didn't. It was an accident. I could never do a thing like that, Ben." Nick was lying out of sight on the floor and Ben went back and stood above Bill.

"It was an accident, Ben," I said.

"I know that. But it will have to be reported. There's his wife too." I could barely make out his words.

"They'll believe you, Ben," Nick said.

"You think that's all that matters, don't you?"

"You know I never meant to, Ben." Nick got up and sat on his bed. He didn't look at Ben.

"You never meant to do anything. That's right. Not over.

With you it was always a bluff, like play-acting."

"They will believe what you say, won't they Ben?" Nick said.

## YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY

James Samuel Benson sat in the shade of the awning that ran along the back of the roadside stand and tried to shut himself off from the world of sight and sound. He closed his burning eyes against the sun and white-painted building, and listened to the blaring sound of a jukebox loudspeaker. He had won \$400 shooting dice in the back-end of a truck after a day picking watermelons in the fields around Manteca, and, as usual, he had drunk too much brandy in celebration of his victory.

His luck with the dice had made it necessary for him to quit his job in the watermelon fields and leave quickly in the night. After the game broke up, he packed his few clothes and left. He did not stop to pick up the money owed him for the picking, but went away hurriedly, going out the back of the hotel, down the alley and along the street to the highway, where he caught a ride with a fruit hauler, a taciturn man who drove hunched over the wheel, accepting an occasional cigarette.

The trucker was going to Sacramento, so they parted company when they reached Highway 99, the truck whining in the night, going north. James, left to himself in the headlight-punctured darkness, walked as far as an overpass and sitting up against the concrete abutment, he dozed but could not sleep. In the early morning he caught a south-bound car, and left it at the turn-off by the roadside stand, where he now sat, twirling the malted-milk paper cup filled with lemonade and trying to collect himself against the onslaught of the hot California sun.

"I believe I will go to Los Angeles," he announced to no one in particular, watching the flies settle on the paper cup when he put it

down. "Yes, I will go to Los Angeles. I will go to Hollywood Park and bet some good horses and become rich and go to bed and sleep for a week."

The jukebox blared on and the flies took over the lemonade. James Samuel Benson put his head down on the rough picnic table and went to sleep. Someone shook him roughly by the shoulder and he belched the brandy taste back into his mouth, rubbed his eyes and looked up. A large man, dark, heavy, and with rolled-up white shirt sleeves was looking down at him.

"You can't sleep here," the large man said. He looked at the suitcase.

James belched again and tried to clear his head by shaking it, but that hurt, so he stopped and licked his lips and looked at the heavy man.

"I will have another lemonade," he said. "The flies drank my last one." He thought about smiling but the effort seemed too much.

"You hitch-hiking?" the man said. He rolled his sleeves up higher and stepped back.

James put up his hand and waved it feebly. "Hitch-hiking. Yes," he said. "I am hitch-hiking. I am going to Los Angeles. Now, how about that lemonade?"

"You can't hang around here," the man said. "I don't want no bums hanging around here. It don't look good."

James looked around at the other tables under the awning. Even though it was early, there were several cars in front and a half dozen people sitting at tables drinking watermelon juice, grape juice, orange juice, and lemonade.

"You are right," James said. "It don't look good. Lemonade?"

The heavy man looked down at him. "Okay," he said, "I'll send one of the girls." He walked away and the back of his white shirt was wet with sweat. His big arms hung down at his sides, as if he didn't want to bother with the effort of swinging them with his gait.

"Whew," said James. "It is hot."

"Yes, it is." The voice came from an adjoining table and James turned to look, blinking his eyes and tasting the hangover taste of brandy. He focused on the woman at the next table and ran his tongue around his mouth and over his teeth.

"What?" he said.

"You said it was hot and I said yes it was," the woman said. She had on a white blouse with no sleeves and was toying with a paper cup in front of her. Her hair was black and tied back behind her head and she looked at James, a small smile on her face.

"Well," James said, and again, "Well. We are in agreement on the weather. Hot. Heat. Hell. And brandy."

A girl wearing shorts came and asked him what he wanted and he ordered another lemonade. He thought of ordering something to eat but the idea of food made his stomach churn, and he gritted his teeth against it and asked her to turn off the juke box instead. She couldn't do that, she said, and went away.

James looked at the woman in the white blouse and rubbed his face.

"I am James Samuel Benson," he said.

"All three?"

"All three. Purely, totally, and I wish to God, abstemiously."

He felt grimy and the sweat was trickling under his armpits and running down his ribs. He clenched his hands and looked at the dirt under his fingernails.

"I am tired," he said.

"Yes," she said as if she were weighing her words carefully before saying them. "You look tired."

"I didn't get much sleep," James said, the words coming from him without the need for thinking about them. He opened his mouth and there they were. "I was up most of the night."

"Oh?" the woman said.

"I was shooting dice in the back of an old truck parked under a street light at the edge of town." He was rolling now, not even looking at the woman, talking out of the half-base of hangover and lack of sleep. She watched him as if not really seeing him, as if only turned in the direction of his voice to hear it better.

"It was payday," James said. "They had money and I had money and now I have more money and they have less. Some of them have none."

"You make it sound simple," the woman said.

"It is simple," James said, harshly. "Luck is simple. Life is simple. I don't want to complicate it." The need for silence was on him now, taking away the need to talk. The girl brought his lemonade and he watched the flies settle on the straw and work their way down it to the crushed ice. He took out his handkerchief, strained the lemonade through it onto the ground and twisted the ice up in the handkerchief and put it on the back of his neck. The juke box stopped and he hoped that it would stay silent, but the hope was short-lived.

"Do you work around here?" the woman asked.

"Was. No, did," James said. "Until last night. Then I had to leave."

"Was that because you won?"

"Um. It was because I had their money and they weren't sure about the way I got it. No, not exactly that. They know how I got it but they weren't happy that it was only me getting the money and not them."

"I see," the woman said.

"I'm glad. I was beginning to wonder about it myself," James said. "Right now it isn't too clear." James looked at her, trying to concentrate on her face. It was hard to tell if she was thirty or forty. She was smoking a cigarette and the smoke curled straight up in front of her face in the still, hot air. Closer to thirty, he decided.

"Why?" he asked after his inspection, rubbing the ice-filled handkerchief around and around on the back of his neck, feeling the cold water from the melting ice trickling down his back.

"Curiosity, I guess," the woman said, dropping her cigarette into the paper cup.

"Like the cat?" James said.

"Like the cat. Only I don't expect to die from it."

"Like the cat," James said, and felt the burning inside of him and the pounding in his temples. He tried to belch and couldn't.

"You probably only need some sleep," she said.

"No," James said. "What I need is Hollywood Park and more luck. Then I need a bed and sleep. A nice bed in a room with air conditioning and a 'don't disturb' sign on the door."

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Oh hell! I guess you are. I'm disturbing myself. I've got to get out of here. Go down the road. Down the long, hot San Joaquin Valley. Down through Modesto and Madera and Bakersfield. Down through the furnace."

"You don't like California?" Her deliberate air needled him.

"Like California? Oh, yes! Of course I do!"

"Where are you from?"

"You are cool, aren't you?" James said. "Very cool and self-possessed. What difference does it make where I'm from? I'm here. Here now, in this place, in the heat of early morning, hungover, listening to that damned juke box."

"You could leave."

"Well I'll be damned," he said. He watched her and knew she was blushing. He stared at her and she stared back. She looked down at the table then and he turned away, the anger still in him.

"I didn't mean to pry," she said, "I was only talking to pass the time of day."

"You passed it," he said. "You passed it and I passed it and now it's gone. I'm between being wet and dehydrated and ...." His voice trailed off and he squeezed the water out of his handkerchief down the back of his neck. There was silence between them then, and he wondered why she did not go.

"Well," he said at last, "You're right. I'm not from California. I'm a pilgrim here in the land of sunshine, heat, broken wine bottles and happy used-car salesman."

"You talk funny," the woman said.

He pressed his temples and ran his tongue over his teeth. "I feel so terribly funny," he said.

"I can give you a ride as far as Bakerfield," the woman said, looking past him. He saw the heavy man approaching again, arms hanging at his sides and his dark face sweaty.

"You want something else?" the heavy man said.

"No," James said. "I am going. I am going to take leave of your hospitality and humanitarian nature and go."

The heavy man shrugged and said, "I got a business to run."

"Yes," James said. "You have a business to run and it don't look good." He got up and picked up his suitcase, the blood pounding in him. He thought he was going to retch.

"God!" he said. "Brandy!"

The heavy man looked puzzled and stood with his hands on his hips.

"You have a passenger to Bakerfield, lady," James said. "Before we get there, somewhere along the road, I will ask you why you offered me the ride but not now. Now I can only think of sleep."

They walked out into the sun and he put his suitcase in the trunk of the car and got in the back seat. "I hope you don't want conversation," he said. "I am going to sleep." He lay down on the seat and put his arm over his face. The woman backed the car out of the parking area of the road-side stand and began driving south along Highway 99. He felt the notion of the car for a time and then nothing.

He awoke when the sun was in the afternoon sky and the car was still running smoothly beneath him. He tried to close his eyes and go back to sleep but couldn't. It was cool inside the car and he looked



up over the front seat at the back of the woman's head. Closing his eyes again he tried to remember and tasted the fierce iron taste inside his mouth and his whole upper jaw ached. He took a deep breath and sat up slowly, leaning over the back of the seat beside her.

"Where are we and what time is it?" he said.

"It is two o'clock and we have passed Merced," she said. "You slept well."

"Yes."

"Air-conditioning," the woman said.

"What?"

"Air-conditioning. The car has it."

"Good. I feel better."

"Really?"

"I feel terrible," he said.

"There's a cafe and a bar just up ahead," the woman said, keeping her eyes on the road. He could see she was wearing sun-glasses. He draped his arms along the back of the seat.

"Fine," he said. "I could use a beer."

"You had better eat too."

"I'll wash my face and hands. Maybe I can eat."

"You should eat something."

"Thank you, mother," he said, leaning back on the rear seat.

The woman said nothing. The car slowed down, wheeled off the road and came to a stop in front of a white stucco building with gas pumps in front and the neon signs blinking on and off in the hot sunlight.

The woman pulled up alongside the gas pumps and he got out on

her side. "I will also do something else," he told her, and headed toward the building.

A young boy came out a door painted bright red and stood there looking up at him. "Fill it up?" he said.

"Ask the lady," James said. "Where is it?"

The boy jerked his thumb over his shoulder and walked out toward the car. James went into the men's room and took off his shirt. He splashed cold water over his face and head and rubbed as much as he could under his armpits. There weren't any paper towels so he dried himself with his handkerchief and walked back into the station, waiting for the attendant to return.

"You sell combs here?" he asked the attendant, a thin, unkempt youth in need of a shave. The boy handed him a card and he took a comb from it, gave the boy 20¢ and went back into the room, washed all over again and combed his hair.

"I need a haircut," he said. He looked at his eyes briefly in the cracked mirror, rolling down the lower lids.

The woman was standing by her car and he looked at it closely for the first time and saw that it was nearly new, not more than a year old. Not a cheap make, either. It was white and it hurt his eyes to look at it.

"Did you drink your beer?" she said.

"No. I am going in to do that now. You?"

He saw she was looking at him through the white-framed colored glasses. She stood beside the car with one hand resting on the fender.

"Look," he said, "I will buy you a drink. Two drinks, three drinks, or even four drinks, but I am damned if I will stand out here in this sun and wait for you to stop admiring your air-conditioned auto-

mobile." He turned and started toward the bar, stopping when he got to the door, and turning again. She had not moved. She still stood in the sunshine, one hand resting on the fender of the car, the other smoothing her hair.

James stopped just inside the door and looked around the bar. It was empty and dim, with only the bartender standing up close to the window getting the light from outside to read his paper by. He glanced up at James who nodded and walked over to the bar. The bartender put his paper down and put his hands on top of the bar and moved the ashtrays around, while he looked at James.

There were some booths over against the opposite wall and James stopped just short of the bar as he heard the door open and close behind him. "Bring a couple bottles of beer over to the booth," he said, and walked over and sat down with his back to the door. He heard her heels as she walked across the floor. She stopped beside the table for a moment, then sat down opposite him in the booth.

"I wasn't admiring the car," she said. He looked at her and saw she had taken her sunglasses off, and her face was tanned and there were wrinkles around her eyes and at the corner of her mouth. She smiled quickly when she caught his eyes on her, then looked at the bartender approaching with the beer.

"I took the liberty," James said. He drank a glass full without stopping, filled it again and set it down.

"Better than the brandy?" she said.

"That depends on how you look at it," James said. "Now it is. At another time it wouldn't be."

"Last night was better for brandy?"

"Yes," James said. "Last night was better for brandy, but this afternoon, with the old taste of grape in my mouth and the spit turning to cotton in my throat, it is better for beer."

He looked at her and she smiled again, a quick movement of muscles at the corners of her mouth. She wore a light shade of lipstick. He swallowed some more beer and ran his tongue over his teeth. The brackish taste remained but it was leaving.

"I have had nothing to eat. Have you?" James said.

"Not since breakfast."

"Well, then, We eat. We eat and drink some beer." He motioned for the bartender. When the man came James leaned back in the booth and looked at the woman.

"I would eat a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich," he said.

"I would too," she said.

"And two more bottles of beer," James said. The bartender nodded and walked around behind the bar and through a doorway that connected the bar and cafe.

"What is your name?" James said, "I am James Samuel Benson."

"I know," she said, "You told me."

"I told you but you did not tell me."

"My name is Carol," the woman said.

"Carol is a name I have known before," James said, "But you are the first Carol who gave me a ride when I had a brandy hangover."

She laughed then and took out her cigarettes and offered him one. He shook his head and she lit hers from a small silver lighter. He watched the smoke curl up in front of her face.

"Do you always say it that way?" she said, "I mean all three?"

Not just James or James Benson, but James Samuel Benson?"

"James Samuel Benson it is, and shall be until death do me part.  
Just Carol?"

"No," she said, "There is more."

"There is more," James said, and finished his beer. She was looking toward the bar. "There is more but you are not going to tell me the more."

The bartender brought the sandwiches and two more bottles of beer and he ate his quickly and watched her silently as she started on the second half of her sandwich. She ate slowly as if she enjoyed it, chewing each bite carefully in the same manner she talked. When she had finished she sat back in the booth and looked up at the ceiling.

"Do you drive a car?" she said at last.

"I drive a car," James said. "I drive a car and a pickup and a truck and a tractor. I drive a tractor only if I have to. Which is to say, if I am hungry enough."

"Would you mind driving for a while? I get tired of driving, especially when there is no one to talk to."

"I'll drive. I can pay you back for the ride. Why did you offer me the ride?"

She laughed again. "Are you always so blunt?" she said.

"I don't want to complicate things," James said.

"Well, I heard you say you were going to Los Angeles. To play the horses, you said. You looked tired and I thought you would ride with me."

"Glad to," James said. "Glad to ride with you."

"Thank you. You see, I'd already driven down from Tonkin when

I stopped there at that stand this morning."

"Tonkin?" he said.

"Yes. My parents live there. I work in Bakersfield."

"I see," James said.

"I'm just now going back to work after being on vacation."

"Vacations are good, I suppose. I never worried about vacations, though. I never had to. Well, Carol and more, are you ready to go down that road, that long, straight road, with not a turn or twist or ending?"

She had her eyes on his face again, a half-smile on her lips.

"I think you are a strange man," she said.

"Strange? Why strange?"

"Oh, just.....not ordinary, I guess. It's as if..." She stopped and looked away in the direction of the bar where the bartender was back at his job of wiping glasses. He didn't ask her to finish, but looked at the profile of her face in the dim light. Her features were thin and the nose a bit long, but the skin was smooth.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I was going to say?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"I was going to say that it's as if you were grieving." She leaned back in the booth and looked at him intently.

James ran his hand over the well-begun day's growth of beard darkening on his face.

"Are you?"

"Grieving?"

"Yes," she said.

"Over a golden grove," James said.

"What?"

"Nothing. Are you ready to go?" He got up and stood by the table.

She gathered up her purse and stood up also, and he moved away from the booth. She stood there, the distance growing wider between them. "I'm going to get a pair of sun-glasses," James said, and walked over to the bar. She went on past him and out the door to the car. He paid the bartender, bought a cheap pair of sun-glasses and followed her.

She was sitting in the car and he went around to the driver's side and got in. He started the car and she reached over and turned on the air-conditioning and the car moved under them, spinning sand and gravel.

"It will be dark when we get to Bakersfield," she said, after the silence between them.

"Yes," James said, not really feeling any need to answer. She put on her glasses again and leaned her head back on the seat cushion.

"Will you wake me when you are tired?" she said. "I am going to try to take a nap."

He didn't answer, only nodded and pressed down on the accelerator, feeling the power and swift motion of the car. The highway stretched out before them, the white center-line gleaming. The heat of the sun beat down on the drying vegetation along the highway.

After a time he glanced at her and saw that she appeared to be asleep. He turned on the radio and settled back, listening to the music. They passed little stands and bars and cafes and by-passed small towns and larger towns. The beating behind his eyes had lessened and the pain in his jaws had subsided, but the taste was still in his mouth and the spots still danced in front of his eyes. From time to time he wiped

the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand and ran his fingers over his face.

She stirred on the seat beside him and sat up as dusk was coming to the valley. Drivers coming from the other direction began turning on their lights and James switched his on too. He hunched over the wheel and blinked his eyes. He knew she was looking at him.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"About twenty miles to go," James said.

"I can drive the rest of the way if you'd like."

"Yes," James said. "I think that would be a good idea. I'm getting tired now, and I wouldn't want to pile up your car."

He looked for a turn off, found one, and they switched places and she drove on. It was dark now, and James leaned back and turned the radio up a little. She was a good driver, handling the big machine as if from long experience and confidence, moving out of the turns with increasing speed and passing the slower moving traffic.

"A fine car," he said. "A pleasure to drive."

"Yes," she said. "I like it. I indulged myself when I bought it, I know. I couldn't afford it but I bought it just the same."

"Nothing the matter with indulging yourself," James said.

She glanced at him, then turned her attention back to the road. He said no more, and the lights of Bakerfield were glowing as they came up over the overpass and dipped down through the valley. The lights on the pumping oil wells glowed brightly, and the rocker arms heaved up and down. They were in the city now, stopping for lights and waiting for the evening traffic at the intersections.

"Where did you want to go?" she asked.



"Anyplace downtown. If you're going downtown." He took a deep breath and sat up straight in the seat.

"Certainly. Are you staying over tonight?"

"Well," he said, "I hadn't thought about it. To go or stay." He shrugged.

"Maybe you should stay over for this one night and get some sleep," she said.

"Here is as good as any to sleep," he said.

"I think it would be better," she said. She drove in silence through the city. He looked out the window at the lighted shops and stores and bars.

"Is the San Marin all right?" she asked.

"I've stayed there before," James said. "The bar is air-conditioned. Everything is air-conditioned except the rooms. They're like a furnace."

She stopped the car in front of the hotel, an old building with a small courtyard and a white stucco front. James looked at the hotel and then at the woman, who was drumming her fingers on the steering wheel.

"I'll get my suitcase," he said. She took the keys from the ignition and handed them to him. He got out and unlocked the trunk and took out his suitcase and set it on the sidewalk. He opened the door and handed her the keys.

"The bar is just inside and to the right," he said. "I'll go in and sign." He turned away and walked inside the hotel and was confronted by a hotel clerk who favored him with a swift glance, and then went back

to his task of poking his finger inside the cage of a mynah bird. He clucked to the bird, wiggling his finger in front of it.

James dropped his suitcase and it made a loud noise on the tile floor. The clerk looked up at him.

"Does it talk?" James said.

"Hell no," the clerk said.

"I want a room," James said.

"The son-of-a-bitch can only say one word," the clerk said.

"What's that?"

"Oscar." The clerk went on wiggling his finger at the bird.

James took a deep breath and let it go. He moved up closer to the clerk. "Let's hear him," he said.

The clerk snapped his finger on the cage. "Talk," he said. The bird jumped to the floor of the metal cage, preened itself, then jumped back to the swing. It began to whistle, a sharp, lingering sound, in human imitation. It cocked its head from side to side, looking first at James, then at the room clerk.

"Is it yours?" James asked.

"Hell no. Belongs to one of the old women who lives here. We got lots of old women living here. Why?"

"I was just going to tell you what I'd do with him if he were mine," James said.

The clerk grinned at him, a twisting of the features more like a grimace than any expression of joy.

"Yeah," he said. "He gets to you. I used to throw water on him when he'd whistle in the morning. With a hangover, that damn whistle is murder." He straightened up and looked at James.

"You don't throw water on him anymore?" James asked.

"The old lady caught me," the clerk said.

James put a twenty dollar bill on the counter and took off his dark glasses. "Have you ever seen a tired man?" he said.

"Sure," the clerk said, and pushed the register at him. He watched James write and when the name was written, he turned the book around and reread it. "James Samuel Benson," he said. "One night?"

"Probably."

"Okay." The clerk gave him a key from the wall rack and counted out his change.

"Get someone to take my suitcase up," James said, "I'm going into the bar."

The clerk put his finger back inside the cage. "Talk," he said. The bird whistled again and the clerk laughed.

Inside the bar James blinked his eyes and saw her in the corner, her dress a white blur in the semi-darkness. He walked to the table and sat down across from her. There were two bottles of beer on the table. He took one and raised it to her.

"Here's to many fast horses," he said.

"Do you like to gamble?"

"I do it," he said.

"I've always been a little afraid to gamble," she said.

"You know what they say. Lucky at cards, unlucky at love." She looked at him through the smoke of her cigarette.

"I got a room," he said, and took a long drink from the bottle.

She put out her cigarette and sat with her hands folded under her chin. She looked better than she had in the harsh light of the day's

sun. They drank the cold beer and she looked around at the murals and at the back bar.

"What will you do now?" she said, finally.

"Drink a little beer, then eat, then sleep," James said. He leaned back in the chair. "I want to thank you for the ride."

She nodded and smiled quickly. "I was glad of the company."

He waved at the bartender and ordered two more bottles of beer. They were silent again.

"Did you ever play the horses?" he said at last, her silence getting on his nerves.

"Only once. I went to Santa Anita," she said. They drank quickly, and he got up and got two more bottles. It was quiet in the bar, and when the bartender turned on the television, James asked him to turn it off.

"What is your name?" he said.

"Carol," she said, twisting her white gloves.

"No. Your name. Your entire name."

She smiled again quickly, a fleeting expression, and it angered him.

"Why the game?" he said. "No shadows, no remnants, the whole thing."

She looked down at the table and he drank some more of his beer. He leaned forward to look at her.

"I can't explain it," she said in a voice so low that he thought he must have missed part of her expression.

"What?" he said.

"I can't explain why I am drawn to you." She closed her eyes for

a moment and then lit a cigarette.

"I want you to go upstairs with me," he said.

"No."

"I want you to go up those stairs and into that furnace of a room and tell me your name."

"No."

He was angry again, and he wanted to be done with it and get rid of that ache that had spread from his head into his chest and belly.

"To hell, hell, hell, with it," he said, and slammed himself back in the chair. He glared at her but she avoided his gaze.

"And I suppose you didn't want me to ask?" he said. He saw her lips move and he knew that she had answered but he did not hear her words.

"What?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "I did want you to ask. What a fool I was."

"Yes, what a fool," he said. He saw her stiffen and she picked up her purse and stood.

"I hope you win," she said.

"What?" James said, but he found he could not look at her now.

"At Hollywood Park. I hope you win." Then she was gone; a flash of white at the door and she was lost from sight.

He sat there, looking at the table until the bartender came and started to pick up the glasses and bottles where she had been sitting.

"Has the lady gone?" the bartender said.

"She has fled," James said, and did not see the arching of the man's eyebrows.

"Bring me a brandy," James said, and the bartender went away and

returned with the drink.

He drank it, and then another, and then another, and then another. James Samuel Benson was getting drunk. Again.